

SERMON
St. Peter's UCC
March 1, 2026
"God So Loved the World"

Scripture:

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 Righteousness Through Faith

Psalms 121 (My Help Comes from the Lord)

John 3:1-17 Nicodemus Visits Jesus

A Pharisee named Nicodemus approached Jesus by night, says our Gospel reading from John this morning. He didn't want to approach Jesus publicly, because Pharisees didn't line up well with some things that Jesus was saying. Pharisees were well educated in the laws of Moses, and believed that following those laws was the only way to covenant with God. Jesus seemed to the Pharisees to be placing himself above the laws of Moses, so, most of the time when we read the Gospels, we read of the Pharisees in opposition to Jesus.

However, Nicodemus, even though he was a Pharisee, was curious; intrigued by Jesus. And so, he sneaks out at night, unseen, to speak to Jesus. He says to Jesus, "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.” Nicodemus, in this statement, calls Jesus a teacher, and not more than a teacher, but acknowledges that there seems to be something more going on with Jesus, beyond what a teacher is capable of.

Nicodemus is confused about what is going on with Jesus, but Jesus understands what is going on with Nicodemus. Jesus hears in the words of Nicodemus all of that confusion. First of all, Nicodemus believes that being Jewish and adhering to Jewish laws is the only way that people can covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. On the other hand, he feels pulled to speak with Jesus, because even though Jesus doesn't act like a strict follower of the law in the usual way, still, he must be speaking for God, because, Nicodemus says, “no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus is breaking the rules of the idea of covenant. He seems to be in covenant with God, apparently, but how can that be, because he is also speaking and acting in ways that don't fit.

So, what does Jesus do with this Pharisee, this confused person who is standing in front of him? He confuses him even more. Jesus says that

you can't see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.

Nicodemus replies that he was already born, so what is Jesus talking about. Jesus tells him that it's one thing to be born from the water of the womb, but another to be born of the Spirit. Now, with that statement alone, maybe Nicodemus could have gotten on board, at least a little bit; after all, the idea of the Spirit of God was nothing radical or new. But then Jesus says, "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." Now Nicodemus is totally confused. This statement, about the Spirit being like a wind that can't really be understood, is far different than simply following the laws of Moses and the rituals of the Temple. It's like a movie I saw once, where someone passed away, and has a helper on the other side in the transition to heaven. When the helper – sort of an angel – has to go somewhere, the person who died wants to know where. The helper says he wouldn't understand, but after being pressed, says, "I had to pause at the intersection of two vortexes." Of course the person who died said, "I don't

understand.” That's about how Nicodemus feels, it seems, with this wind of the Spirit statement.

Jesus is trying to help Nicodemus, this Pharisee, to actually see beyond the laws of Moses; to see greater truths. Jesus is letting him know that there is much more to truth in the mysteries of God; mysteries that are beyond the written law; that the written laws of Moses are good, but can only take us so far to real understanding of what God is about in covenant with us.

Nicodemus can't comprehend the idea that God is at work in mysterious ways unbound by Jewish understandings and customs. Nicodemus is having trouble accepting that God isn't owned by the Jewish people in an exclusive way. We don't control wind, and Jesus is saying that, in the same way, we don't control the work and the Spirit of God.

The Apostle Paul, in our reading today from Paul's letter to the Roman Christian community, reflects a similar idea; a similar idea of the expansiveness of God, when he says that it is faith that brings us to covenant with God, and not just the Mosaic laws or who you are. It is

faith that marks the true descendants of the covenant of God; that you don't have to be a literal descendant of Abraham to be in covenant with God, because faith is what bound Abraham to God to begin with. The Apostle Paul says that Abraham is the father of many nations, but that it is faith that is his truest legacy, and that all who have faith are the true heirs of the Abrahamic covenant; God's promise of relationship.

We are in the church season of Lent, when we seek to grow closer to God; to understand God more, and our relationship with God more. One thing that we should always be careful of when thinking about God, and our covenant with God, is that, when we seek to limit God in our minds in worldly ways of thinking, we're imaging God in our minds in too limited a way. Just as Jesus tried to help Nicodemus understand covenant with God beyond the limited view of the Pharisees, so I can imagine Jesus wanting to help us understand covenant with God beyond any limited views that we might have.

No one has ever owned or controlled or fully understood the wind of God's Spirit. No one born of the dust of this world really understands

where the wind of God's Spirit comes from and where it returns. But what we do know is wonderful beyond our imaginations. What we do know, what Jesus told us, is that “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.”

Understanding is important and full of riches when it comes to our faith, but it's also true that, when it comes to understanding, there is a place where the sidewalk ends and eternal truths begin; truths beyond us. And yet, out of that eternal realm, grace comes to those who turn in faith to God, to receive it. Grace comes to those who humbly accept that we are not all wisdom and all strength. A saving grace is offered to all who, especially in this season of Lent, cry out that we are lost in this world, bound to suffering and sin, and that we need God, both in our lives and in the world.

Christians don't have to perfectly understand God; we never could. But that's not what saves us anyway. Instead of Christians feeling the need to try to define God's grace, freely given in spite of our sins, let's instead

focus on one thing that we can know. Christianity works. I can preach that 24/7. Christianity works. If you want to be saved and find new life, true life, and life eternal, turn to Jesus. If you want the most powerful prayer in God's creation, simply say the name of Jesus. If you feel lost in darkness, say the name of Jesus. The devil himself must back off from the power of that heavenly love come to us.

Christianity works. We can say it with excitement, because it's true. The world is a wonderful place in many ways, but, as we look around, there can be no doubt that we need a higher power. And then we can praise God, because we have the message and Spirit of Jesus, offering to lift the world into the heart; the heart of God.

Some things we have perhaps heard before from people who are turned off by Christianity are claims that Christians are hypocrites, or that they act as if they are better than others, or act as if they're in an exclusive club, or are too quick to point an accusing finger at others, or act as if God loves them only. But no one here is here because they believe that they are better than others who don't attend a church. We're here for a very

clear reason; that we readily admit how much we need God in our lives and in the world. And I feel good that our church family doesn't waste time deciding who God loves more. You know what we do? We help others in need, because we already know that God loves them. We see the face of Jesus at Bethany Children's Home, in our Heifer presentations, and in the faces of the girls smiling on their way to school in Nepal.

St. Peter's is busy enough serving God. We really don't have time to point fingers, don't have time to judge, especially as to who God loves the most, because we're too busy reaching out to others with open hands of compassion.

Friends, in this church season of Lent, may you grow deeper in your relationship with God, your covenant with God, and may you find your greatest understandings in the heart of heaven. Amen.