

**Lent Week Two**  
**“We Misunderstand”**  
**John 3:1-17**  
**Rev. Joy Laughridge**  
**March 1, 2026**

We began a sermon series last Sunday, and the series is related to Joshua’s devotional that we’ve made available for you to use. If you’re just hearing about the devotional for the first time today and you’d like a copy, we have a few hard copies available in the narthex, or you can still call or email the church office and we’ll make sure you get one.

Joshua’s devotional invites us to treat Lent not as a time for trying to fix ourselves but as a time to remember that we are works in progress who are invited to trust the God who is working on us and in us. The series title, *Loved Always*, is meant to remind us that even before we become the completed works that Christ is forming, we are already loved by God.

Each week we are focusing on one of the Scriptures and reflections from the devotional. Today, we are looking at John 3 where we find some of the most famous words in all of Scripture and a story that’s probably familiar to many of you about a man named Nicodemus. Let’s listen to the reading from John 3:1-17.

**3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>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 unless God is with that person.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from**

above.”<sup>4</sup> 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?”<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.<sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.<sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

<sup>11</sup> “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. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> “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. <sup>17</sup> “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.

We’ve all been on one side or the other of some kind of misunderstanding. Some misunderstandings turn out to be ones that we laugh about. Jimmy Fallon has done a segment on The Tonight Show about song lyrics that people have misunderstood, and it’s hilarious. These are some of the misheard lyrics that made it on

to his list. When Elton John sang, “Hold me closer Tiny Dancer,” someone thought he was singing, “Hold me closer, Tony Danza.” The line from the Bon Jovi song Livin’ on a Prayer really says, “It doesn’t make a difference if me make it or not,” but someone thought he was singing, “It doesn’t make a difference if we’re naked or not!” When Creedence Clearwater Revival sang, “There’s a bad moon on the rise,” that line was misunderstood as, “There’s a bathroom on the right.”

Some misunderstandings are funny, but not always. The result of some misunderstandings can be hurt feelings, or a major inconvenience, or something worse. Some of you may remember the catastrophic runway crash between two Boeing 747 planes in the Canary Islands in 1977 that killed 583 people all because of a miscommunication between the pilot and air traffic controller.

Whatever result our misunderstandings yield - good, bad, or neutral - to misunderstand is to be human, and in our text today, we see Nicodemus having a human moment. He comes to Jesus seeking knowledge. He wants to know who Jesus really is, but Jesus tells him that the answer to that question isn’t one that comes through natural reasoning or evidence alone. To come to a true understanding of who Jesus is, he tells Nicodemus that a person has to be born again. The metaphor completely throws Nicodemus off because his mind is stuck in the realm of the natural, physical world. He takes Jesus’s words literally which leaves him dumbfounded and confused. “How can these things be?” he asks.

There are two levels to Nicodemus’s misunderstanding. He misunderstands the figurative speech, but at a deeper level, he has misunderstood *how* a person is able to see who Jesus truly is. Nicodemus thinks that uncovering the truth about Jesus is something that comes after gathering the facts, weighing the evidence, and

drawing a reasonable conclusion, but what Jesus describes is something much more mysterious and unmanageable. What Jesus describes is an awakening to the truth about his identity that comes not as the result of human effort but as a gift and a revelation from the Spirit of God. Jesus is more direct about this later in a conversation that he has with the disciples. He asks them who people say that he is and when they respond with answers about Elijah and prophets, Jesus asks, but who do *you* say that I am? Peter says he is the Messiah and the Son of God and Jesus says, “this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood but by my Father in heaven.”

The point that Jesus makes both to Nicodemus and again to his disciples later is that the awakening of faith that saves us from spiritual death and brings us to life is an act of God that is received as a gift. In I Timothy, Paul refers to this miraculous activity of God as “the mystery of faith.”

Some of you love mysteries. When I was growing up our, one of our favorite family TV shows was *Murder She Wrote*. Those kinds of mysteries are appealing. It’s fun to try to figure them out, and part of the pleasure of them is that at the end you get the satisfaction of seeing how the mystery is *solved*. All the loose ends get tied up and all the questions are answered. The mystery of God, and the mysterious activity of God is different though. It’s the kind of mystery that we can’t fully explain by adding up all the clues and answering all the questions like Nicodemus tried to do. We can’t explain the mystery of how God awakens faith in our hearts or the exact mechanics of how new life comes to us through Christ being lifted up on the cross. We can’t explain it, but we can respond to it by receiving it and trusting the One who acts. We do this when we profess our faith like Peter did, and when we say that we will live under the rule of Christ, obeying his teachings and following his example.

The Spirit's mysterious work in us has a transformative effect. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here!" As the Spirit works and we respond, we really do begin to change and become more like Christ. During Lent especially, we may be thinking about how we would like to grow in his likeness which is always a good desire, but sometimes when we want but don't see the transformation we hoped for, we can begin to feel discouraged. We start to wonder why we aren't changing, and if we aren't where we want to be, the natural solution that seems to be within our control is to just try harder. I'll do more. I'll set goals. I'll be more disciplined, but often instead of being changed, we find ourselves feeling tired or disappointed about our lack of progress.

Trying harder seems like a good idea — just as gathering facts and evidence seemed like a good way for Nicodemus to understand Jesus- but there is a reason that it leads to spiritual frustration. It's because trying harder is a way of trying to accomplish with our own power what only the Spirit can accomplish. In his devotional on this passage from day 7, Joshua reflects on Jesus's phrase, born again, and he says this. "The language of being born again is...about starting from a different source. It suggests that the life God offers cannot be produced through effort or insight. It must be given. It comes from outside us, not from within us....This challenges the way we often think about growth. We assume that spiritual life is something we build...but Jesus describes something more radical. He describes a kind of life that can't be constructed. It can only be received."

Even when we hear that we can't single handedly build ourselves into being who God wants us to be, we may still wonder how this transformation that the Spirit works can or will happen. Maybe we can accept that there is some mystery, but isn't there *anything* that we can or ought to do? The answer is yes, but it isn't try

harder. Instead, we are urged to remember this good news: that the life that the Spirit *begins* in us is the life that the Spirit *sustains*, so what we do is *trust*. Trust the Spirit who is at work in you. Ask the Spirit for help. Listen to the Spirit. Then exercise your faith by leaning not on your own understanding and bravely following the Spirit's leading.

Paul once wrote to a community of believers in the book of Galatians who had received the gift of faith and new life but had fallen back in to leaning on their own understanding. He asked them this question. "After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3). A few chapters later, he steers them away from their own striving which is not helping them become the people that God wants them to be, and he points them back to relying on the Spirit saying, "Walk by the Spirit... If we live by the Spirit, let us be guided by the Spirit."

This is the invitation that is extended to us today. If we want to keep growing, and changing, and becoming more like Christ, we don't need to devise a better spiritual program or push ourselves harder. We are invited to walk daily in relationship with the One who gives us his life. The wind blows where it chooses. We can't control it, but we can open ourselves to it, and trust the Spirit to do only the Spirit can do. Amen.