



# A SERMON

by Rev. Victor H. Floyd: January 25, 2026



## Normalizing the Light

### Nicodemus and the World We Accept

#### John 3:1-21

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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.* Jesus answered him, *Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.* 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?* Jesus answered, *Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above."* 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 said to him, *How can these things be?* Jesus answered him, *Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.*



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*Lights Up.* In high school, I joined a big Methodist youth choir to tour the Deep South. Our productions featured lights and choreography. We wore matching light blue jumpsuits with big pointy collars. Imagine the Smurfs as guests on the *Donny and Marie Show*. It was the first time I sang in public. And my mama cried. Opening night. We enter the stage, the congregation cheering. We come into formation, lights full up, and in unison, we recite John 3:16, King James style:

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have life... everlasting, everlasting... (fade to black)... everlasting, everlasting...*  
It was 1980. We had great hair. But the lights. The lights fading from full up to total darkness is the exact opposite of what John 3, today's scripture, is all about.

*Lights Down.* Nearly fifty have passed, and now I view the dimming light symbolically, prophesying what will come. The AIDS pandemic will be next. Religious extremists will seize the opportunity to demonize (sick and dying) queer people. The white supremacy of the Ku Klux Klan will fester and morph into militias, Proud Boys, and now the president's own paramilitary force, ICE, invading American cities under the pretense of the law. The darkness has people. The darkness has always had people. And they are committed.

*"The Uses of Sorrow" by Mary Oliver<sup>1</sup>*  
*Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness.*  
*It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift.*

This week, a box of darkness. The president alienated our NATO allies with a screed of insults, concluding, "Sometimes you need a dictator."<sup>2</sup>

Another box. ICE took five-year-old Liam Ramos into custody. He and his father asylum-seekers, *documented and legal*, but now incarcerated in a Texas "detention facility" run by a corporation that gets paid per body by the federal government—our tax dollars. The more money for the corporation, the more money to they funnel back to the politicians who stock their warehouses with predominantly Black and Brown bodies. How can this kind of darkness be a gift?

<sup>1</sup> Mary Oliver, *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 52. Mary Oliver says that she dreamed this poem.

<sup>2</sup> <<https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/trump-sometimes-you-need-a-dictator/>>

And yesterday, another box of sorrow, one that has kept me up most of the night. In Minneapolis, ICE agents murdered Alex Pretti, an 37-year-old ICU nurse from the local VA, and immediately, Kristi Noem went on camera to lie about who he was and why her government murdered him. There are multiple videos proving his innocence. They restrained him face down on the ground and emptied 10 rounds into him, and for what. Multiple videos that tell us a grim truth: our government is now executing political dissidents.

Perhaps these boxes of darkness are gifts. When we open them, examine their contents, we expose their contents to the light that makes plain what is going on. We can't un-see video evidence. We can't un-hear words spoken plainly. And, sadly, we can no longer believe a word our current government says.

This is the gift of darkness. Evil, when exposed by light, pushes light-loving people toward what God wants us from us. Light shows us what we must prepare for, where the light of Christ must shine. The light unites the people who will never give in to darkness.

*Superhero Light.* The Gospel of John opens like a superhero origin story, strangest Christmas pageant ever. No shepherds, no angels, no manger, no star, just Logos (Word) and Light. Pre-existent light. Light that doesn't just illuminate the universe but creates it.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ...*

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.<sup>3</sup>*

More than candle-glow, this is light with power. Light that reveals what is hiding, exposes what is unraveling.<sup>4</sup> Enough light to power superheroes. The light that refuses to stay safely in the realm of heaven.

*Nic at Night.* Only two chapters after John described Logos and Light, he introduces a very human man, Nicodemus. Not a villain. Not a monster. Nicodemus is a symbol of the world's systems, a symbol of what the light of Christ came to heal, the system that calls itself normal.

Nicodemus approaches Jesus at night, when he feels safe from the system. He is a powerful leader, a Sanhedrin, a teacher, a person fluent in the rules. He knows how things work and what is possible. He knows which questions are allowed and which questions are dangerous. Nicodemus, in other words, symbolizes *the world*.

*The World.* In ancient Greek, the world was called *kosmos*. Not the planets. Not the stars. Not creation itself, *kosmos* is the world as it is organized—structured by habit and fear, hierarchy, domination, exclusion. In today's scripture, *kosmos* is not dirt and trees and oceans. Kosmos is the world we have arranged to protect ourselves from the in-breaking, convicting, sin-revealing light of God. It's what we normalize in order to thrive and survive. And Jesus does not come to destroy it. Verse 17: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." This is how Jesus is not a superhero. God could have destroyed evil. Jesus engaged with the devil for 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness! Jesus is love. God is love, without laser beams to vanquish the enemy.

But to save. The Greek word here is *sōthē*. Salvation. Nothing about escape. No one evacuated due to rapture. Salvation is not about going up there. Salvation in Christ is about down here. A foretaste of glory divine. *sōthē*. Saved. Fixed. Made whole. One more time for those in the back: **Jesus does not peddle eternal fire insurance!** Salvation is God's deep commitment to reform the world we learn to call normal.

Think of all we have been called on to normalize over the past 12 months. All that we have been told is legal; so therefore, says J.D. Vance, just cooperate.<sup>5</sup> Cooperate? With this? Cooperate, or what? (*Take a deep breath.*) Let's come with Nicodemus, and ask Jesus what do we do.

Step one, says Jesus: "You must be born from above, born again."

Here, the Greek is slippery, and Nicodemus does what systems always do when confronted with mystery and Spirit. He literalizes it. He asks irritating, procedural questions, "How can this be? Born again? Am I to go back into the womb? Just how do you do that?"

And Jesus does not scold him but invites him into the wind, the *ruach*, the work of the Spirit that orders chaos since the beginning. It blows where it wills. You can't control it. You can't predict it. You can't quantify it. Mystery is the Holy Spirit's superpower. Jesus is offering Nicodemus more than a spiritual reset button; he's naming a reordering that the system itself cannot generate.

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<sup>3</sup> John 1.

<sup>4</sup> David Brooks, "The Next Trump Crackup" *New York Times*, January 23, 2026, GIFT ARTICLE: <[https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/23/opinion/trump-authoritarian-power.html?unlocked\\_article\\_code=1.G1A.lAma.Te3V\\_mNJ10Q&smid=url-share](https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/23/opinion/trump-authoritarian-power.html?unlocked_article_code=1.G1A.lAma.Te3V_mNJ10Q&smid=url-share)>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/22/us/minneapolis-ice-crackdown.html>

Creative Advance. Process theologian Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) once described reality itself as creative advance<sup>6</sup>—the universe always becoming more than it used to be, drawn forward by possibility. Creative advance is not dragged forward by force, neither does advance fly in wearing a cape. In this vision, God does not coerce the world into goodness. God lures it. God offers each moment a next best possibility. Jesus is that lure, embodied. Jesus is the light sent to save a system that has no interest in loving the way God loves. Which means that sin is not primarily individual wrongdoing. Sin is where the system fails, gets distorted into something deadly. **Sin is what happens when the system organizes itself against love.**

As theologian Marjorie Suchocki teaches, sin is not only personal but embedded in social systems and inherited patterns—the systems that shape our lives before we choose—systems that outlive their purpose, and harm people long after their engineers are gone.<sup>7</sup> Sound familiar? Normalized immorality. Normalized xenophobia. Will we normalize state terror?

We belong to a system that cannot imagine loving the whole world. Like Nicodemus' system, we sort people into clean and unclean, legal and illegal, worthy and disposable. But Jesus stands inside that system—in love—and his light cracks it open.

This is how John 3:16 is not sentimental greeting card. "For God so loved **the world**...that **whosoever** believes" Not the obedient sycophants. Not the mighty. Not the righteous remnant clinging to their pearls. But the world. The system. The whole stinking mess. John 3:16 isn't about being rescued from world; it's about God refusing to give up on it.

We live inside systems that choke life and call it necessary. We are normalizing cruelty. We have normalizing lies. We are normalizing home invasions. We are normalizing fear as policy, death as collateral damage, and chaos as diplomacy. This is not partisan language. It is diagnostic gospel language. When systems choke life and call it order, the light names it for what it is. The Gospel does not ask us what is legal. The Gospel does not care if it wanders into politics. The Gospel is about right and wrong.

*God With Us.* Whitehead wrote that God is "the great companion—the fellow sufferer who understands."<sup>8</sup> God is not aloof from human suffering. God absorbs and remembers it, refuses to let suffering become meaningless. And then God gives back to the world a clearer vision of what could be. It happened with Nicodemus. It can happen with us, within us, and in this world.

And here is the quiet miracle of this text: Nicodemus' heart cracks open. For a while, he fades into the background—but he becomes more than he first appeared to be. Later, he demands a fair hearing for Jesus before the council.<sup>9</sup> Later still, Nicodemus comes to the cross, carrying spices, to tend Jesus' body after his public execution.<sup>10</sup> So many parallels with today.

*Reflect the Shine.* Unitarian Universalist pastor and author Robert Fulghum tells a story<sup>11</sup> about, when the Q and A time comes, he always asks public speakers the same question: "What is the meaning of life?" And finally, someone answered. Greek politician-philosopher Alexander Papaderos answered:

"When I was a child we were very poor. One day on the road I found the broken piece of a mirror. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was impossible, so I kept the largest piece. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated that I could reflect light into dark places. It became a game for me to get into the most inaccessible places I could find... As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was.. a metaphor for what I might do with my life. ...I am not the light or the source of the light. But light—truth, understanding, knowledge – will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it. **I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know.** ...This is the meaning of life."

Praise God. What a comfort. We are not the light or its source. But we are sent to reflect the light. We are fragments—shattered by grief, limited by fear, shaped by history—fragments that God needs to save the world. Praise God for every voice that says, "This is not normal." Praise God for every act of courage that shines truth into the shadows. The light is infinite. Dictators, meh, they come and go. Through the Word, the light prevails.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://encyclopedia.whiteheadresearch.org/entries/thematic/metaphysics/the-mystery-of-creativity/>

<sup>7</sup> Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); and *The Fall to Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015). Suchocki argues that sin is relational and systemic, embedded in social structures that shape consciousness and behavior prior to individual moral choice.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality Corrected Edition*, eds. David Ray Griffin & Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 351.

<sup>9</sup> John 7:50-52.

<sup>10</sup> John 19:39-42.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Fulghum, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*, 1989, quoted online at <[http://www.garywolff.com/subdir/life\\_meaning.htm](http://www.garywolff.com/subdir/life_meaning.htm)>.

