

Guided by the Promise

Holy Communion

March 1, 2026

John 3:1-17

¹ There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. ² He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.” ³ Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it’s not possible to see God’s kingdom.”

⁴ Nicodemus asked, “How is it possible for an adult to be born? It’s impossible to enter the mother’s womb for a second time and be born, isn’t it?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. ⁶ Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Don’t be surprised that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ ⁸ God’s Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. It’s the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹ Nicodemus said, “How are these things possible?” ¹⁰ “Jesus answered, “You are a teacher of Israel and you don’t know these things? ¹¹ I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don’t receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. ¹⁶ God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. ¹⁷ God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

¹ So what are we going to say? Are we going to find that Abraham is our ancestor on the basis of genealogy? ² Because if Abraham was made righteous because of his actions, he would have had a reason to brag, but not in front of God. ³ What does the scripture say? Abraham had faith in God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. ⁴ Workers' salaries aren't credited to them on the basis of an employer's grace but rather on the basis of what they deserve. ⁵ But faith is credited as righteousness to those who don't work, because they have faith in God who makes the ungodly righteous...

¹³ The promise to Abraham and to his descendants, that he would inherit the world, didn't come through the Law but through the righteousness that comes from faith. ¹⁴ If they inherit because of the Law, then faith has no effect and the promise has been canceled. ¹⁵ The Law brings about wrath. But when there isn't any law, there isn't any violation of the law. ¹⁶ That's why the inheritance comes through faith, so that it will be on the basis of God's grace. In that way, the promise is secure for all of Abraham's descendants, not just for those who are related by Law but also for those who are related by the faith of Abraham, who is the father of all of us. ¹⁷ As it is written: I have appointed you to be the father of many nations. So Abraham is our father in the eyes of God in whom he had faith, the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that don't exist into existence.



On Ash Wednesday we were reminded of our need to have a clean heart as we journey through Lent, moving towards the cross and the empty tomb. Last Sunday we were reminded that God is with us even when we struggle to have a clean heart. Even when we are lost in the wilderness, God is present, giving us what we need to resist temptation. Presence is a promise of God.

Last week we saw an example of this in Matthew 4, as God was with Jesus as he faced the devil's attacks. Psalm 32 offered us a reality check: when we try and go it alone or when we hold onto our sin, we get worn out and we feel God's hand heavy upon us. The warning found in the Psalm was coupled with a promise. When we do turn to God, confessing and repenting, God lifts that weight, removing our guilt and shame. Through it all - whether lost in sin or whether seeking to walk faithfully - we were again reminded of the promise that God is always with us.

On Monday and Tuesday of this past week we read a few verses from Genesis 12. Abram was called to leave home, family, place of worship – everything – to go to a place that God *would* show him *after* he stepped out in faith. This too came with a promise: to make Abram into a great nation through which the world would be blessed. Abram showed radical obedience, stepping out in faith. On Wednesday we read from Psalm 121. These words echoed the themes of God's presence in the wilderness and of God's promises to us when we are faithful and obedient. The psalmist looked to God for help, raising his or her eyes to the mountains, the traditional place where one meets God. The psalmist then celebrated finding God's presence, protection, and rescue, "*whether going or coming – from now until forever from now.*" This constant, abiding presence is ours too when we turn to the Lord our God.

Our readings for the rest of the week, also our readings for this morning, focus on God's guidance and direction and promises in times of need. In Matthew 3, Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night, wrestling with questions of faith. Jesus teaches him that all who seek God will be born anew, born of the Holy Spirit, God's indwelling, constant presence that leads and guides us in our walk of faith, ultimately securing the salvation of our souls.

In our Romans 4 passage, Paul first connects back to Abraham's righteousness and then reminds us of the promise of God's grace to all who seek to walk in faith and trust in the Lord our God. As we prepare to better understand how we are invited to allow our faith and our lives to be guided by God's promises, let us begin with a word of prayer...

God of new life, Jesus said that we must be born again from above to enter into your kingdom. We surrender ourselves to you now so that we might receive life from you, in this moment, and in each moment to come. May your Spirit blow through our worship and may it transform us by your grace. It is with this prayer that I ask you, O God, to bless the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.

Please turn with me to Matthew 4 as we begin this time together.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, with some questions to ask

Jesus. He is a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. We never find out what burning questions this religious leader has for this surprisingly popular nobody from little old Nazareth because Jesus sets the agenda almost from the get-go. Yes, Nicodemus tries to begin the conversation by shmoozing Jesus, acknowledging Jesus' credentials, at least amongst the people. Popular opinion holds that Jesus is a prophet sent from God, one who has performed some pretty amazing miracles. Before Nicodemus offers the "But..." that will open the door for his burning questions,

Jesus gives the conversation it's direction as he tells Nicodemus, *"I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom."* This is the answer to the questions that

Nicodemus should be asking. Nicodemus is on his heels from this moment forward.



Nicodemus does not understand how it is possible for an adult to be born again. Jesus invites the religious leader to shift his thinking from the physical world, from those *“born of the flesh,”* to the spiritual, those who are *“born of water and the Spirit.”* Jesus points out that those who desire to enter God’s kingdom must be born of water and Spirit. Poor Nicodemus cannot wrap his head around this simpler explanation either. He still wants to know, *“How are these things possible?”* Much of Nicodemus’ struggle comes from who he is. He is a teacher of the Law, an advocate for keeping the Law as one’s work or means of showing one’s faith. Nicodemus is also, much like others in power yet today, a keeper of the status quo.

Jesus is totally turning Nicodemus’ way of life and his understanding of faith upside-down. To be born of the water and the Spirit is a re-birth, a receiving of life not from keeping the Law or the status quo, but from receiving God’s life-giving gift of grace in each moment. That means we let go of who we think we are, who we want to be, and especially who others think we are or ought to be. Surrendering completely to God and trusting in God’s grace, we allow ourselves to become who and what God created us to be. This surrender feels scary and it feels uncomfortable. Jesus senses this in Nicodemus and addresses it in verse 8.

Here Jesus reminds Nicodemus that the Spirit *“blows wherever it wishes.”* Yes, it is always present, and we can hear or sense the Spirit at times, but we do not know when or where it will manifest itself in our lives. In addition, we do not know where the Spirit might lead us once we have surrendered to God. As we push on to the end of today’s gospel lesson, Jesus explains how one receives the gift of the Spirit that leads to being born into the kingdom of God. Even though Nicodemus is still mostly lost, Jesus offers these words: *“Everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.”*



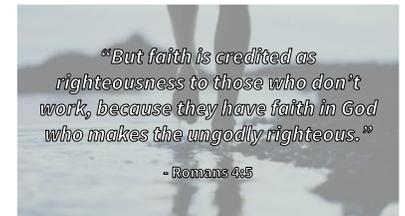
It is about believing in the Savior. It is not about keeping the Law. On the surface level, we understand this to mean that if you say you “believe in Jesus” — whatever one thinks that this means — then you get to go to heaven after you die. But there is so much more to what believing in Jesus gives to us and to our lives. In the here and now, in the day to day, whoever receives new life in Christ, breath by breath as a gift from God, whoever lets God continually re-create them, we receive life here and now that’s infinite and can’t be taken from us. For those who live in faith in Jesus, eternal life becomes infinitely deep, not just infinitely long.

Thoughts on eternal life and death and returning to dust fill chapter 2 of our Lenten book, *Stretched*. Author Christopher Richmann reminds us that death is something that we all succumb to and that it is, therefore, something that we wrestle with in this life. On page 24 he reminds us that at most funerals, “We rightly name death as the enemy while also confessing that death does not win.” While our physical death is a natural part of living in this world, Richmann also points out that those of us who walk in faith also die a spiritual death. When we confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, we die to self, crucifying our old habits and ways of the world. This enables us to be “born again” – to begin living a new life of faith.

Through belief in Jesus, we come to participate in life — in the life of God — that is eternal. It doesn’t mean we are immortal, but that we share in something that is. Eternal life is not a privilege awarded to certain people who believe the “right things.” Our new life in Christ is a gift that is offered unconditionally and that is infinitely present whenever we simply receive the gift again. The new life is about being, about living in right relationship with God, and about allowing the Spirit to lead and guide us where it may. This new life is not about doing. It is not about keeping the Law or any set of rules. Again, that is where Nicodemus struggled.

To gain another perspective on this, please turn with me to Romans 4. Paul uses Abraham as the model of faith, as many Jewish teachers before him did. But Paul sees Abraham's being credited as righteous not because of his actions or doing, but solely because of his faith. You see, Paul says, Abraham believed God and lived by that belief long before the Law was ever given. The promises of God that Abraham received came through his faith and trust that what God said would happen would come to pass. We sometimes struggle with this as Nicodemus did and as some in the churches in Rome apparently were. We tend to think that we must work our way into the kingdom of God. We often fall into the trap of thinking that we need to earn our way into the kingdom. This way of thinking keeps things in our control.

Paul is addressing this incorrect thinking in verse 5, where he writes, *"But faith is credited as righteousness to those who don't work, because they have faith in God who makes the ungodly*

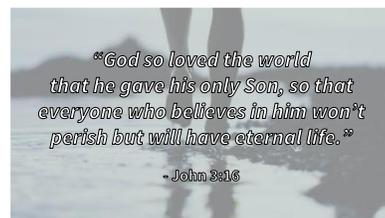


righteous." When we think new life and eternal life are under our control, then we try to work at securing the salvation of our souls. Paul argues instead that the way to new life now and to eternal life one day comes through faith and trust. He points to Abraham's example of seeing the world in a new way, of understanding God's call and promises. God spoke to Abraham, inviting him to *"go to a land that I will show you."*

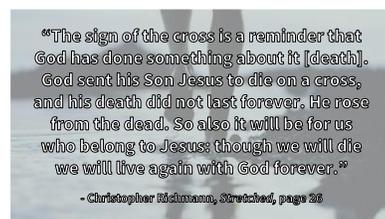
God did not say, here's the plan and here is how long it will take you, and here are the directions to follow. No, God just said, go. Go in faith and then I will show you where to go. In Nicodemus' day and in our time, we would equate this to surrendering our lives to the Holy Spirit, to allowing God's Spirit to blow this way and that, taking us along as God moves and acts in our world and in our lives. In surrender, we open our hearts up to the guidance and direction of the Spirit.

Hearts opened by God's love, we come to know that we are loved unconditionally. This frees us to live in faith and trust. It frees us from thinking we need to earn God's love or our place in the kingdom of God.

Jesus also addresses this struggle to receive the free gift of grace in John 3. Speaking into what he will do on the cross, Jesus tells Nicodemus, *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life."* The sacrifice that Jesus made, it is all about God's love. And it is not just love for those who already believe and live a righteous life. God gave Jesus for the whole world. That's everybody, not just those who believe.

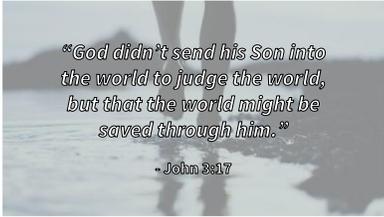


God did not wait until everyone committed to believing in Jesus before Jesus went to the cross. No, Jesus went to the cross so that all who come to believe can have life. Eternal life is a gift that, like God's love, is offered unconditionally and becomes infinitely present whenever we simply receive it. This is what Paul was speaking of when he wrote, *"The inheritance comes through faith, so that it will be on the basis of God's grace."* Our inheritance or receiving of this gift comes through belief in Christ as Savior. It is offered through God's grace. We can inherit this gift because of what Christ has already done. Returning to *Stretched*, Richmann reinforces this promise when he writes, "The sign of the cross is a reminder that God has done something about it [death]. God sent his Son Jesus to die on a cross, and his death did not last forever. He rose from the dead. So also it will be for us who belong to Jesus: though we will die we will live again with God forever" (page 26.)



This free gift given in grace counters our thoughts that being “righteous” means doing this or that. We receive the gift and we become sons and daughters when we surrender our whole being to God’s will and way. This surrender leads us to live in right relationship with God. Our relationship with God, in spite all our maneuvering and trying, is established and sustained by God’s love and grace alone. The relationship that God keeps with us proves that we are God’s beloved. Period. Attempts on our part to be more or less deserving of God’s love and grace make no difference at all. That is why the gift is unconditional. The unconditional nature of the gift means that we can receive God’s love and grace even when we are less than we’re expected to be. The offer is never rescinded. It is always there for us to receive. This allows us to come to the table of grace again and again.

Jesus drives this point home when he adds these words: *“God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”* Jesus did not come to judge us



“God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

- John 3:17

worthy or unworthy of love, worthy or unworthy of grace, worthy or unworthy of eternal life. Jesus came to give himself for us, the beloved. God gave his only Son to show us that we are worthy of God’s love, saving grace, and eternal life. This is the promise: you are loved and forgiven. For this free and unconditional gift, we say thanks be to God. Alleluia and amen.

Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. When you have struggled, as we all do, to receive God’s grace, what helped you to ‘turn the corner,’ to get to a place to receive? How did your faith grow as a result?
- 2) *Pray*. Some see God as judge and not as Savior. Maybe that is you, maybe it is someone that you know. Spend time in prayer for a new way of understanding and belief.
- 3) *Study*. Read Romans 4:18-25. How does this deepen your understanding of Abraham’s actions as acts of faith rather than as works? How might you make this same choice?