

“LEARNING NEW TRICKS”

March 1, 2026

John 3:1-17

When I was a child, one of the presents I received for Christmas was a **microscope kit**. It came with different lenses, glass slides, a scalpel (Yes, back then you gave kids sharp objects to play with), tweezers, a dropper, and instructions with various experiments. One day I took a mason jar down to the local river, filled it with water and brought it back home. I used my dropper to suck some water out of the jar and made a drop on one of the slides. Then I looked through the microscope. Low and behold there were a bunch of odd-looking critters moving on the slide. That microscope introduced me to a whole other world I previously didn't know existed.

As I grew up, I discovered other worlds. There were physical worlds like the rainforest, the ocean, or space. Other worlds were more relational like prejudice, poverty and the strangest world of all dating. I found that some of these worlds are easier to enter and navigate than others. For instance, we can't shrink ourselves small enough to shake hands with a protozoa, although we probably wouldn't want to being they eat organic matter. We could walk in a rainforest and with special equipment we could dive under the waves. However, landing on the moon would be a much bigger challenge. Some worlds are just prohibitive.

Lent invites us into the world of the Spirit, into the Kingdom of God but it is not an easy world to navigate in and we can't enter it on our own. We need help and this morning's lesson points the way.

I. BY THE BOOK

John's Gospel introduces us to an evening visitor named **Nicodemus**. This man was impressive and not typical of the crowd that followed Jesus. He was an aristocrat, wealthy and sat on the Supreme Court of the Jews. More importantly, he was learned,

religiously disciplined, and obedient to the Laws of God and the Jewish faith. It's amazing one such as Nicodemus comes to see the poor carpenter Jesus at all. Most likely Nic is there for two reasons. **One**, it was the duty of the Sanhedrin to examine potential false faith teachers. His group kept the orthodoxy of Judaism, and he wanted to know where this Jesus stood.

Secondly, Nicodemus seems genuinely impressed with Jesus. He tells 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.”** To his credit Nicodemus sees God is at work in Jesus and he wants to find out more. Remember, Nicodemus is an intellectual and he wants to have a theological discussion with Jesus, probably to go over the fine points of Jesus' teaching. However, he gets more than he bargained for.

Jesus answered him, **“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”** Nicodemus replies, **“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?”**

Understand what Jesus did and did not do. Jesus did not engage Nicodemus in the finer points of the law, something that a Pharisee like Nicodemus was used to. Instead, Jesus invites him into the kingdom of God, into the realm of the Spirit. Nicodemus was unprepared for this and the more Jesus talks about the work of the Spirit the more Nic grows anxious. Finally, he cries out, **“How can these things be?”** Jesus looks in amazement, **“Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”** How can that be?

II. EXPERIENCE

In 2010, a science fiction action film debuted called **Tron: Legacy**. It is the second installment after the original **Tron** movie was released in 1982. In the first movie a man named Kevin Flynn invents a computer world called **the Grid**. In the course of events, Kevin is sucked into this computer world and is presumed lost, leaving behind his company and more importantly, his young son.

Jump into the future; after a cryptic message from his long-lost father, this now grown-up son, **Sam**, goes looking for his dad. He too is transported to the grid and finds his father with the help of a strange computer-generated woman named **Quorra**. This woman is fascinated by the books that Kevin brought into the Grid. She has read them all and has questions about this other world. In one such discussion with Sam, she asks him what the **Sun** is like. In the Grid there are lights, but there is no sun. Sam begins to describe the sun and then realizes that words won't do. The sun is outside her reality. This **Quorra** must experience the sun for herself to understand it.

I think this is the struggle of Nicodemus, at least one of his struggles. It's not that Nicodemus isn't familiar with the ideas of spiritual rebirth and the kingdom of God. The problem is they are just ideas to him. Nicodemus has not experienced rebirth. Remember he has an intellectual faith. His is a strict follower of the religious rules of faith. Nicodemus is trying to figure how the Spirit works and Jesus says you can't. You can only see what effect the Spirit has on human lives and experience the Spirit yourself. Nicodemus hasn't stepped into the deep end of the pool and experienced the mystery of God.

And here is a great lesson for us. Faith based on intellect is not enough. Faith based on religion is not enough. Ritual purity is not enough. Faith based on miracles is not enough. Its not that intellect, religion or miracles aren't helpful, but they will

not take us to rebirth, a life in the Spirit, eternal life, nor the kingdom of God. For that journey God must act.

III. **LIFT UP THE STICK**

Once a defense lawyer said to his client, **“Well, I have some good news and some bad news.”** *“What's the bad news?”*, asked the client.

The lawyer says, **“Your blood matches the DNA found at the murder scene.”**

“[No!]” cries the client. *“What's the good news?”*

“Well,” the lawyer says, **“your cholesterol is down to 140.”**

Well, the bad news is we can't force our way, think our way, or earn our way into the Kingdom of God, a life in the Spirit, a life with God. The good news is we don't have to. God has already provided the way. This life of God has been opened to us through the lifting up of the cross. Jesus tells Nicodemus, **“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.”**

The Moses reference comes from an Old Testament story. On one occasion the Hebrews were disobedient, and God sent poisonous snakes among them. The cure was a serpent made out of bronze. Moses raised this up on a pole. When bitten people looked upon the pole they were cured. Of course, it wasn't the pole that cured them, but they were lifting their eyes up to God for help, and thus were saved. Interestingly, the word **“lifted up”** means **“raised up cross”**.

Nicodemus is smart enough to know that people don't usually change their nature. Even though it is mentioned throughout the scriptures, this rebirth you are talking about, sounds nice, but it is impossible for us to truly change our hearts and enter in a life with God. Jesus claimed it is possible. The cross and more importantly

the life of Jesus on that cross, is the key that unlocks the door of God's gracious action, the bridge that cross the gap between this material world and life in the Spirit. If you want to enter it trust your life to me and the Spirit will enter you and begin to change your heart, and you will experience this new way of being.

IV. THE PROCESS

Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*
 “Being born again is the work of the Spirit. Whether it happens suddenly or gradually, we can't make it happen, either by strong desire and determination or by learning and believing the right beliefs. But we can be intentional about **being born again**. Though we can't make it happen, we can midwife the process. This is the purpose of spirituality: to help birth the new self and nourish the new life. Spirituality is midwifery.”

I like his birthing imagery. The baby comes when it is ready to come out. We can't force God's hand, we can only be open to it. But like all good births there are some actions that help the process along. Here are some that I have found helpful.

One humbly confess your need. Jesus pointed to the children and said the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. You can only enter it as a child and children know their need.

Two, Ask God to be a part of his eternal fellowship which is what eternal is. Again, Jesus said, “**Ask and you will receive, knock and the door shall be open to you, seek and you shall find.**”

Three, surrender daily – put everything in our life in Christ's hands. Trust him with it.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, writing in his book, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956*, (Westview Press, 1997, 130), says that “From the moment you go in prison you

must put your cozy past firmly behind you. At the very threshold, you must say to yourself: ‘My life is over, a little early to be sure, but there’s nothing to be done about it. I shall never return to freedom. I am condemned to die — now or a little later. But later on, in truth, it will be even harder, and so the sooner the better. I no longer have any property whatsoever. For me those I love have died, and for them I have died. From today on, my body is useless and alien to me. Only my spirit and my conscience remain precious and important to me.’”

Solzhenitsyn says that “Confronted by such a prisoner, the interrogator will tremble. Only the man who has renounced everything can win that victory.” It’s that kind of surrender that trusts our life to Christ that prepares the heart to receive the life of Christ.

Fourth, walk in the Spirit each day through love, grace, and obedience. Practicing the faith plows up the rough places in our character and heart.

Fifth, perhaps the most difficult one, **wait** trusting God will act in you and us.

Again, we can’t force the Spirit’s movement, we can only be present to it.

IV. RESULT – AND SIGN OF ETERNAL LIFE – PEACE

A little boy had been pawing over the stock of greeting cards at a stationery store.

After a few minutes the clerk became curious and asked, “**Just what is it you’re looking for, sonny? Birthday greeting? Message to a sick friend? Anniversary congratulations to your mom and dad?**”

The boy shook his head, “**No.**”

“**Then what kind of card is it that you want?**” asked the clerk.

The boy answered anxiously, “**Got anything in the line of blank report cards?**”

The sign of this Spirit movement is that we will experience deep love, joy and peace. Peace with God, peace with self, peace with life, peace with others, and peace on earth. This doesn't mean we will never get upset, or angry, or anxious. But we will discover a strength within our being because our spirit has been made right with God. Our anxious living has been replaced by God's fellowship, and nothing can take that from us. Lent invites us to the Kingdom. Let us prepare our hearts that we might receive it. **Amen.**

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley
Sunday, March 1, 2026
Second Scripture Lesson

John 3:1-17

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 unless God is with that person."

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 the 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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.