

John 3:1–17

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

April 6, 2025

The Wilderness of Rebirth

Let's talk about this strange teaching of Jesus — this idea of being “born again.” Or, as the Greek word *anōthen* also means, “born from above.” Nicodemus hears it and scratches his head. Honestly, it's classic Jesus: confusing metaphors, sideways answers, and spiritual riddles that don't land cleanly. If you've ever read the Gospel of John and thought, “Can you just answer the question?” — you're not alone.

For many of us, “born again” carries baggage. It often gets associated with a certain brand of fundamentalist Christianity. When I first moved to San Francisco, I was asked more than once, “You're not one of those *born again* Christians, are you?” My answer? “I'm afraid so — but let me explain.” Because this phrase is Jesus', and it's not about a dramatic emotional conversion moment; it's about a radical transformation of perception. Jesus is saying that to even see or enter into what he's about — this kingdom of heaven thing — have to be reborn. Not once. Continually.

As Dr. King put it, when commenting on this passage, Jesus didn't give Nicodemus moral instructions — he told him his whole structure had to change. His mindset. His categories. His entire operating system. And that kind of spiritual upheaval? That's not something you control or schedule. Jesus says it's like the wind. You can hear it, but you can't pin it down. But it happens. And it happened to Nicodemus.

1. The Curiosity of Nicodemus

Nicodemus is no spiritual lightweight. He's a rabbi, a Pharisee, a leader, probably older, certainly wealthy. His name even means “Conqueror of the People.” He has power, prestige, and a seat on the Sanhedrin, the very council trying to get Jesus killed. He's also deeply embedded in a theological system where he has all the answers. Certainty is kind of the gig. But Jesus doesn't fit. He's not trained, not from the right place, not one of “us.” Yet somehow, God is clearly with him. And Nicodemus can't ignore it. Even though everything in his world says to dismiss Jesus — his politics, his peers, his privilege — Nicodemus stays curious.

That's astonishing. Because power, tribalism, and binary thinking usually make people less curious. And yet Nicodemus risks it all to meet with Jesus. At night, yes — but still. He goes. Brian Zahnd describes it beautifully:

“Jesus was the monkey wrench in Nicodemus' theological system. The pebble in his shoe. The solar eclipse casting a shadow of doubt across his certainty.”

Certainty is comfortable. Certainty sells. But Nicodemus has the courage to question. And that curiosity cracks open the door to transformation. He starts with “Rabbi, we know ...” and ends up asking, “How can this be?” — which is a very different posture. That's not arrogance. That's awe. That's openness.

I love that about him. He shows up with questions instead of answers. Even though it's risky. Because, as I've said before, if following Jesus doesn't get you in a little trouble with your original tribe, maybe you're not actually following Jesus.

This curiosity leads to more than just a midnight chat. A few days later, Nicodemus defends Jesus in public (John 7). He fails to stop the crucifixion — but he's there. And after the worst has happened, he steps forward again, providing 75 pounds of spices for Jesus' burial — an extravagant, very public act of devotion. Nicodemus, the old Pharisee, gives Jesus a royal burial.

Jesus often shows up in the dark night of the soul — when the questions are too big, the system starts to crack, and the old answers stop working. That's when something like being “born again” becomes possible.

Maybe you've come here today with something weighing on your chest. A doubt. A loss. A question you haven't dared to say out loud. That's your night. That's your moment to find Jesus.

I've never had a spiritual breakthrough that didn't start in the dark. In pain. In doubt. In deconstruction. That's where Jesus meets us. That's where the wind starts to blow.

2. The Path of Nicodemus

This path isn't linear or easy. It's more like birth: painful, messy, mysterious. Nicodemus comes in certain — he leaves confused. But in a holy way.

Jesus tells him, “You must be born from above,” and then compares it to wind: you hear it, you feel it, but you don't know where it comes from or where it's going. That's the Spirit.

In other words: you can't control it. You can't manufacture it. But it happens.

Debbie Blue, a pastor in Minnesota, writes:

“The wind has a reputation in the Bible. In Greek and Hebrew, the word for wind is the same as spirit and breath. It's the wind over chaos in Genesis, the breath in Adam's nostrils, the spirit that rattles dry bones back to life in Ezekiel.”

She continues:

“This new birth may not seem likely, but Jesus says: trust me. The wind blows. Bones dance. Humanity is reborn. Not by blood, or flesh, or human will—but by God.”

To be born again is to be birthed by God. It's not something you do — it's something you receive. Like breath.

So how does it happen? I can't give you a formula, but I can testify.

As a college senior, watching the 1984 Olympics, a guy I grew up around was winning the 100-meter freestyle. I was burdened with vocational angst, I suddenly heard a thought louder than the rest: “You must preach the gospel.” The crowd roared, and I just sat there with tears rolling down my face, like I had just been hit with something invisible but undeniable. Tears. Weakness. A rush of peace. That was that.

Years later, on a ferry near NYC, again restless, again uncertain — I heard: “This is the kind of place you must be in.” More tears. Hands shaking. Heart racing. More wind. That was that. Those moments can’t be planned. But they can be noticed. They can be stewarded. And sometimes, they start with frustration, doubt, and discontent.

If your soul is troubled, that might not be a problem to fix — it might be a sign that God is near. Maybe the wind is starting to blow.

3. The Savior of Nicodemus

Nicodemus had a hunch. He took the risk. He stayed curious. He asked his questions in the dark. And eventually, he stood in the light.

We have more than a hunch. We have the rest of the story: the cross, the resurrection, the Spirit, the church. Jesus did more than confuse people with metaphors. He embodied them. He went to the cross, not just to fulfill his own teaching, but to reveal God’s love and defeat death itself.

As Sara Miles says:

“God works despite our disbelief, beyond our best logical arguments, to bring the dead to life, call into existence what does not yet exist, and make all things new.”

That’s the heart of it. We’re not invited to simply behave better, believe harder, or clean ourselves up. We’re invited to be reborn. Again and again. It’s not just something that happens once — it’s a lifelong pattern. A rhythm. A wind.

If you’re not at least a little frustrated right now, wondering what exactly I mean — congratulations. That’s how Nicodemus felt too. Jesus doesn’t offer a spiritual checklist. He invites us to sit with him in the dark, in the mystery, until the light breaks through.

So here’s the invitation: Stay curious. Let yourself be troubled. When your soul feels restless, go find Jesus. Not with perfect answers, but with an open heart. Because being born again isn’t about certainty — it’s about surrender. It’s about letting the wind blow.

So if you’re confused, if your faith feels like wind — untamed and unpredictable — you’re in good company. May you feel the Spirit blowing, even now. May you stay curious, and may you be born again, in the way only God can do it: quietly, mysteriously, in the night.

Amen.