



Sunday, March 1, 2026
John 3:1-17 (Second Sunday in Lent)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompañado

In today's gospel from John, we meet a man who comes in the dark. His name is Nicodemus. He was a Jewish Pharisee – part of the strict religious group often opposed to Jesus. He was a member of the Sanhedrin – the ruling council. He was a prominent teacher in Jerusalem. He was highly influential and respected. And yet, he secretly visited Jesus at night to learn about his teachings.

Night, in John's gospel, is never just about the time of day. Night is confusion. Night is fear. Night is the place where we hide our questions, our doubts, and our uncertainties. Nicodemus comes in the dark of night because something in him is unsettled. He's seen the signs. He's heard the teaching. But he doesn't yet understand. And so he comes to Jesus.

Jesus tells him something astonishing – *“no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”* Nicodemus is confused. He thinks in earthly terms – biology, effort, achievement. Jesus speaks of the Spirit, of gift and new birth. And in true Lutheran fashion, in these words we hear the heart of the gospel – this new birth isn't something *we* accomplish. It is something God does.

We don't step into the light. The light comes to us. And then comes the words that many of us have known for so long – *“For God so loved the world...”* Not, *For God so loved the worthy.* Not, *For God so loved the honorable.* Not, *For God so loved one nation over another.* *“For God so loved the world.”*

God's love isn't selective. It's not partisan. It's not earned. It's simply grace.

John tells us that light has come into the world, and yet people seem to love darkness rather than light. That contrast feels painfully real in our current day.

We see darkness in war and violence. As tensions and conflict swirl in places like Iran and Ukraine, we're reminded how fragile peace can be. We see leaders posture and nations rage. We see fear driving decisions. And we wonder where the light is.

We see darkness in our own communities. In Minneapolis and across the country, debates over immigration and the actions of Immigration and Customs Enforcement stir anxiety, anger, and heartbreak. Families fear separation. Neighbors mistrust one another. People argue not just about policy, but about human worth.

We see darkness in our politics – divisive, contentious, and often cruel. It feels at times as though we're shouting past one another, certain of our own righteousness and suspicious of everyone else's motives.

And we see darkness in quieter places too – in hospital rooms. In strained marriages. In unpaid bills. In depression that won't lift. In guilt we can't shake. Like Nicodemus, we come in the night. And into that night, Jesus speaks, *“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.”*

The world.

In John's language, “the world” isn't a favorable term. It includes brokenness, heartache, and resistance. And that is precisely what God loves.



Sunday, March 1, 2026
John 3:1-17 (Second Sunday in Lent)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompañado

In Jesus, God doesn't stand at a distance. God enters it. God takes on flesh. God walks *into* our darkness. This is where our Lutheran theology steadies our hearts – salvation isn't God rewarding the good and punishing the bad. It's God rescuing sinners who can't rescue themselves.

The cross isn't condemnation poured out on "those people." It's mercy poured out for all people.

For soldiers and civilians. For immigrants and border agents. For protesters and politicians.

For you. For me.

Nicodemus comes in fear of being seen. Later in John's Gospel, he will step into the light, helping to bury Jesus after the crucifixion. Grace may work slowly, but it works, nevertheless.

And that very same grace is at work in us.

When we truly believe that God loves the *whole world*, it begins to disarm our fear. We no longer have to defend God with anger. We no longer have to secure our identity by attacking others. We no longer have to pretend that we're morally superior. We're born from above. We belong to Jesus. And because we're secure in that love, we're freed to love boldly in a broken world.

It means we can pray for enemies as well as our allies. It means we can advocate for justice without denying the humanity of those who disagree with us. It means we can tell the truth about suffering without falling into hopelessness. It means we can bring our daily struggles – our private darkness into the open before God, trusting that we will not be condemned.

The promise of John 3 is not that the darkness will disappear overnight. Wars may continue. Political arguments won't cease tomorrow. Our personal crosses don't magically dissolve.

But the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness does not overcome it. That's not optimism. That's resurrection hope.

"For God so loved the world..." When we hear these words, we must hear them as expansively as God means them.

God loves people in Tehran and Tel Aviv. God loves people in Minneapolis and in detention centers. God loves Republicans and Democrats. God loves the anxious parent, the angry activist, the weary soldier, the frightened child. And God loves you. Not because you came in the daylight. Not because you understood everything correctly. But because, like Nicodemus, you came to Jesus at all.

My friends, whatever darkness you carry this week, bring it into the light of Jesus. Because you won't find condemnation there. You'll find welcome. You'll find grace. You'll find forgiveness. And you'll find a love that's wide enough to hold the whole world. Thanks be to God! Amen.