

1 March 2026
Lent 2

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Fix Your Eyes on Jesus”

Text: John 3:1-17; Romans 4:1-8, 13-17; Hebrews 12:2 (Gradual)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Seventy-five pounds. That might not sound like a lot to you, or to a carpenter, a stone mason, a farmer, or someone else who works with their hands. But it was for him. For he wasn't a laborer. Nicodemus was a scholar. He worked inside, with books, with his mind.

So seventy-five pounds was tough for him. But how could he not? How could he not bring those seventy-five pounds of spices (John 19:39) to bury the man who three years before had set him on this path when they met that night. To understand the Scriptures and faith and God in such a new way. Nicodemus was **a teacher of Israel**. He *thought* he knew. He thought he knew the Scriptures. This man showed him how much he did not know.

Seventy-five pounds. That's how heavy *his heart* felt now, and even heavier, as he and Joseph carefully took down the body of Jesus from the cross. It reminded him of the weight he felt that night in talking with Jesus. The words so strange, yet so wise, and so different than anything he had heard before. Words that now he would never get to hear again, he thought. Words that had been silenced - partly, at least, by the efforts of his fellow Pharisees . . .

So many times he had been there and listened as they plotted and planned, as they asked Jesus questions to trap Him, or to get Him to say something to accuse Him with. But *every time* He knew just what to say. When they asked Him about the Sabbath (Mark 2:23ff), when they asked Him about the traditions of the elders (Mark 7:1ff), when they asked him about paying taxes to Caesar (Matthew 22:15ff) - but *every time* . . . He did, well, what He did to Nicodemus that night. Spoke words as if directly from God.

And now Nicodemus had done it; exactly what Jesus told Him three years ago. He looked at **the Son of Man lifted up** on the cross. He didn't understand what that had meant before, when Jesus spoke that to him. But now he did. He felt like Israel must have felt in the wilderness. Yes, wilderness, that described him now. He was still a

Pharisee, but he wasn't one of them. He didn't fit anymore. Did he believe? Was *he* a disciple? Jesus was the one who had died, but he felt like *he* was dying. It was all so confusing . . .

Like it had been that night. He sat down with Jesus, ready for a good, scholarly session, the kind he so enjoyed. He knew Jesus would be good for that, for they knew that He was ***a teacher come from God, for no one [could] do [the] signs that [He did] unless God is with him.*** But instead of a good, scholarly back-and-forth, a meeting of the minds, an interesting *tête-à-tête*, Jesus had taken over. Put him on his heels right from the get-go. ***Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.***

Born again . . . such an odd phrase! Almost an oxymoron, but not quite. But almost! There is birth and there is death. There is no *again!* You're born once, you die once. This was a most unusual way to begin their conversation! But okay, Jesus, I'll play along, I'll go with it, Nicodemus remembered thinking. What do you mean, Jesus? ***How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?*** Can't you hear how absurd you sound, Jesus? He thought it was a pretty good response.

But Jesus, instead of answering his question, doubled down! ***Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Truly, truly.*** He said it again. He was saying this is the absolute truth that is above and beyond debate. But debate it was exactly what they - Nicodemus and his fellow Pharisees - had done, when John had started baptizing and all the people were going out to him and listening to him and being baptized by him. They objected. *Who authorized him? Where did he come from?* They had gone out and confronted John with those questions. Now it's *Jesus* talking the same way, talking about water and the Spirit . . . *Is He saying we should have listened to John? Is He saying we should have been baptized by John? Is that what this new birth by water and the Spirit is?*

If so . . . if so, this would turn Nicodemus' world upside-down! ***Born again*** was completely different than born *once* and then do everything you can to enter the kingdom of God. Learn God's Word and live by it. Fast and tithe. Follow all the laws and the traditions of the elders. Give alms. Pray. That was the way! And he was good at it! That was the way to the kingdom of God, wasn't it? *He thought he knew . . .*

But Jesus was saying something different. That just as we are born of the flesh, that's not enough. We must also be born of the Spirit. *But how can that be? Really, how can that be?* Nicodemus really wanted to know . . .

But now Jesus was dead. Born once, die once, and now they would lay Him in the tomb, once. *Would Jesus be there? Was Jesus there? In the kingdom of God He spoke about?* If only he'd had more time . . . another chance to sit with Jesus, talk with him, learn from him . . .

Or did Jesus tell him enough? Now, as he stood at the cross, looking up not at a bronze serpent but a dead **Rabbi** . . . (The Romans and the chief priests called Him a criminal, but Nicodemus would not!) It was as if His words had now come true . . . ***And 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, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.***

Whoever believes, not works. Whoever believes, therefore, must be this born again. Whoever believes and is baptized . . . Water and the Spirit . . . spiritual life, life in the Spirit . . .

That's what was said of Abraham in the Old Testament. That Abraham wasn't justified by works. ***Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.*** Abraham had been an idolater in Ur of the Chaldeans (Joshua 24:2), but God chose him, called him, and gave him a new life. Abraham hadn't done anything; he had been *born again!* It was all God's work *for* him. ***And all the families of the earth would be blessed through him*** in the same way, it said. By faith. By believing.

And hadn't David then later said: ***Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.*** That's how Abraham was blessed, and his offspring blessed. A new birth to a new life . . .

That night had been so confusing, but now, somehow, it seemed as if everything was coming together - all the Old Testament prophecies, all the words of Jesus, all the things He had done that they had opposed . . . He knew. He knew better than Nicodemus. He knew better than all of them. It was as if He knew this day was coming. That this is why He came. To die, that Nicodemus might live. That Nicodemus might be *born again* . . .

Truly, truly, ***I*** now say to you, ***that's exactly why Jesus came.*** To be lifted up. So that all the world could see Him there. So all the world could look to Him and believe. ***For God so loved the world,*** He did this. He sent His Son to die. He sent his Son to save. He sent His Son to give new birth to you. The new birth of Holy Baptism. The new birth by water and the Spirit. That you who have been bitten by satan, live. That you who are hopeless, have hope. That you who are dying, have the hope, and more than

hope - the *promise* of everlasting life. And a new life to live even now.

Ah! But you know that, right? You've been catechized, like those who will be confirmed next Sunday. You're not confused like Nicodemus, right?

But what do you do when life intrudes? When sickness, trouble, and the fear of death intrudes? Or when the good things God gives you begin to take over your life and so become not so good? What do you do when the burdens you are carrying feel like seventy-five pounds - or more! - on your heart? And feel too heavy to bear? What then?

How often, like Nicodemus, we turn to our own strength, or do things the world's way, or even think that God is against me, has turned His back on me, is punishing me for my sins and what I have done. So I better clean up my act and do the right things so God will bless me again! Pray more, give more, do more . . . Those aren't bad things, but can you hear a little Nicodemus in you? The Pharisees weren't bad guys. They did a lot of good things. But for the wrong reasons.

That night, Jesus pointed Nicodemus outside himself and what he did, to what only God could do, *and did* for him. And we need the same. No matter *what* we know, or *how much* we know, we constantly need to be taught, to be pointed outside ourselves, for the devil, the world, and our sinful nature keep trying to take our eyes off Jesus and off Him lifted up for us on the cross. And when we do, when we take our eyes off Jesus, that's when the fear, the confusion, the anxiety, the heaviness, the doubts, come. *How can I climb back into my mother and be born again?* Nicodemus wondered. *How can I do what God has asked ME to do?* we wonder. Nicodemus couldn't, and we can't.

But Jesus can. And did. For us, yes, by nature we're born once and we die once and so do everything we can until it's all over. **But by grace there is more.** By grace we are born again, born from above, born of water and the Spirit. By grace, Jesus *reverses the order*, so that *first* we die, once - here and now, in the waters of Holy Baptism - and *then* are risen to life - but not just to live once, but to live forever! By grace we are joined to Jesus in His resurrection to a life that cannot end.

And that changes things. It changes our view of sickness, trouble, and fear of death. It changes how we look at the things of this world - for as good as they may be, they are passing away. But we are not. There's more for us. More than this. And if all this is taken away from us - and it will be one day - then we will be lifted up. Lifted up from death to life, from sadness to joy, from struggle to rest, from time to eternity. In Jesus. Who took the incalculable weight of sin from each of us, to unburden us and set us free.

That's why our Gradual this Lenten season keeps telling us to do what Jesus told Nicodemus to do: ***to fix our eyes on Jesus***, on the Son of God lifted up on the cross. For that is the answer to our sin, our fear, our death. That if God would do that for us, if God would sacrifice His only-begotten Son for *me* . . . what's greater than that? So that changes everything.

And it seems to have changed Nicodemus. From the beginning of John's Gospel, coming to Jesus at night, to the end of John's Gospel, bringing those seventy-pounds of spices to bury Him . . .

And it has changed you, too. We may not always live like it, we may sometimes forget, our sin may at times get the better of us. But *that* does not change *this* [pointing to crucifix.] The Jesus lifted up for you, the Jesus by whom you are born again and raised to a new life, the Jesus who forgives you, and the Jesus who now feeds you with His Body and Blood. Fix your eyes and your faith on Him, here, and you will fix your eyes on Him there, in that life that has no end.

For that seventy-five pounds that is so heavy on us? Here's someone to carry it for you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.