

Sermon Notes – March 1, 2026
Peace Lutheran Church
Holy Gospel of St. John 3: 1-17
“Born of Water and Spirit”

The lections throughout Lent, especially in Year A , draw on the originals as a time of preparation for Easter baptism. Water appears nearly every week. This week, in addition to water images, there are other baptismal motifs to explore: journey, darkness, mystery, birth, and life and death.

A womb-like darkness deepens the background of some of the week's texts. Nicodemus ventures out at night to discuss the mysteries of faith with Jesus. While the promise to Abram under the starry night sky is still to come at this point in Genesis, his path ahead is cloaked in mystery, unseen, relying on God to find a way “to the land that I [the Lord] will show you” (Gen. 12: 1). Psalm 21 includes the promise of shelter from the light: “The Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night” (Ps. 121: 5-6). The final line of the text from Romans recalls the original fertile darkness of creation, invoking the God who “calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4: 7).

The misunderstandings and multiple meanings at play in the Nicodemus story seem especially appropriate for night time. The Greek text allows for fluidity of meaning: *anōthen* can describe being born either “again” or “from above” (John 3: 3), while English forces one meaning or the other. When Jesus links this birth to water and “the Spirit,” invoking “the wind” that “blows where it chooses” (v. 8), the grammatical divisions deepen; the Greek *pneuma* can be translated as “wind,” “Spirit,” or “breath,” and in the NRSV it alternates here between “the Spirit” and “wind.” Nicodemus struggles to interpret Jesus' mystical teaching in other than literal ways, much like those at the temple (“But he was speaking of the temple of the body” [John 2: 21]).

Today's readings unfold a theology of journey. The psalm echoes imagery that is sometimes used at funerals: “The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on forevermore” (Ps. 121: 8). A prayer for the day likens journey and birth imagery: “O God, our leader and guide, ...You bring us new birth.”

In western Christian traditions, there has recently been a recovery of the baptism-as-new-birth motif after centuries of emphasizing baptism-death-and-resurrection. Today's texts offer connections between the two. Nicodemus, instructed in the night about the new birth of water and the Spirit, returns near the end of John's gospel as if he were a midwife to the new birth of Jesus himself: "Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds" (19: 39). In John's gospel "eternal life" (3: 16) is not only a future state but also a promise of life in the present. Scholars note that the original hearers of John's gospel may have heard this promise as a challenge to the violence-backed, boastful slogan of imperial "eternal Rome."