Good morning. On our journey toward the cross and the empty tomb this Lenten Season, we pause to listen in on a conversation between Jesus and a Pharisee, a respected religious leader, named Nicodemus. Nicodemus wants to discuss Jesus’ identity and things of the Kingdom. He approaches Jesus, as many do, out of curiosity, but he is immediately confronted about his own spiritual need. He faces the truth that new birth in Christ is an imperative for new life. He learns of the divine priority of salvation over judgment, and he learns of the invitation of a relationship with his God that goes beyond religion. As they do for Nicodemus, these truths shape the way that we think and live. What do you think when you hear the phrase, “Born again”?

Remember, the Pharisees were serious about following the law. In his discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus points to the heart of the matter: “Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again’” (John 3:3). This response to Nicodemus symbolizes the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The *new birth* Jesus references is accomplished by the Holy Spirit and appropriated by faith. We see in the Old Testament that Israel is renewed in heart and spirit for the sake of God’s name:

25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Ezekial 36:25-27

As a background to Nicodemus’ seeking out Jesus, we know that baptism was a hot question of the day. Here, Jesus points toward the core of baptism, repentance—admission of spiritual need and the acceptance in humility of the new life found only in Christ:

2 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh[a] and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. 4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in

transgressions— it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus . . . Ephesians 2:1-6

To be born again into this new life in Christ is not a work of our own. Consider that, in fact, it was the work of the Holy Spirit that drew Nicodemus to seek out Jesus. No, we cannot work for the new life promised in Jesus Christ. Only by His blood, scripture says, have we been brought near Him. And Christ is not someone to be evaluated and simply added to our lives. Scripture says, “You must be born again”; there is no wiggle-room here. Our response to Him is submission and worship. We must all be born again because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. In 1John, the Apostle writes, “8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.” Yet, despite sin, Jesus answers a seeking Nicodemus with love.

What could be more important than to know where you stand in relation to what God says to you in John 3:14-16: “14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” What could be more important than embracing this truth and to treasure Christ? We all need a savior. To receive Him is more than a repeated prayer and behavior modification. It is to surrender, to die to self, and to receive the new birth and walk by faith. It means living in harmony with God and by the truth of His Word.

We cannot truly encounter Jesus and not be changed by the weight and glory of Christ, His salvation, and the gift of new birth in Him. John 3:16 displays the scope of God’s love, and you are the object and recipient of that love. In the book of Isaiah, we see how the messiah will accomplish God’s plan and bring salvation to the world: “he says: ‘It is too small a thing for you to be my servant/ to restore the tribes of Jacob/ and bring back those of Israel I have kept./ I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,/ that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth’” (Isaiah 49:6). Isaiah portrays Christ as a servant accomplishing the plan of redemption, bringing salvation to the world. And in Revelation 7:9-10, we witness the realization of that plan:

9 After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. 10 And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,

who sits on the throne,

and to the Lamb.”

This plan reflects the fruit of God’s love and Christ’s sacrifice. From prophesied Messiah to baby in a manger to Rabbi to sacrificed Lamb of God to victorious King reigning forever. The scope of God’s love covers the world. That’s why we exalt Christ and share the Gospel. Christ died in our place, and in Him there is life abundant. We were perishing, but by grace through faith, Christ gives us new life:

14 The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. 16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. 1Timothy 1:14-16

There is NO ONE beyond the reach of god’s love and saving grace. It is not by our good work but by faith alone that we receive new life. His work in and for us changes us. Christian, you have been rescued! Do you live that way? His saving you should affect everything, generating a heart of gratitude and a renewal of spirit daily.

Remember, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Look now at how Jesus wraps us their conversation:

19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. John 3:19-21

Are you walking in the light of God’s love? In the abundant life and light of salvation? Have you strayed, gotten cold or lukewarm in your faith? Is there sin in your life that you need to confront and for which you need to repent? His love and grace are sufficient! You were made alive together with Christ. Are you experiencing that? Maybe, you are here and never received the free gift of salvation. Maybe, like Nicodemus, you came out of curiosity or out of a habit of religiosity. Can I tell you this: Christ is available this morning?! The word “whosoever” shows us that eternal life is available to all who believe, regardless of sins, age, race, or any other factor. How will you respond? YOU are “whosoever”!! Embrace the grace. Know you don’t deserve it but can readily receive it. Allow the Holy Spirit to make today a new start for you.

Passage in Support of this Sermon:

John 3:1-21

3 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

3 Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

4 “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

5 Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So, it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

9 “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

10 “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? 11 Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still, you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things, and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.