

“Which Way the Wind Blows”  
March 1, 2026  
Scripture: Psalm 121; John 3:1-21

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, we’re told. But why do we need to know that? Who were the Pharisees? All we really learn about them comes from the gospels, where they’re portrayed as opponents of Jesus and called, even by him, hypocrites and “brood of vipers.” In my experience when a group of people is universally reviled and described negatively everywhere they’re mentioned, they are probably being misrepresented. But it’s hard to find unbiased descriptions of Pharisees.

The only self-described Pharisee we know of who left a written record is actually Paul the Apostle. He says before his conversion he was “as to the law, a Pharisee.” Probably what he means is his understanding of the centrality of Torah was modeled on the practice of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were not a religious sect within Judaism; they were more like a philosophical school. There were only about 6,000 of them in Judea in Jesus’ day, so not very popular, really. But they did hold a belief in something called the “oral Torah,” which was in addition to the written Torah, and they believed they were the inheritors of that oral tradition directly from Moses through a long line of teachers.

It’s a little surprising that someone who held that belief would be interested in teachings from Jesus. We’re told Nicodemus came at night to visit him, which implies he’s there secretly. Of course, in John’s gospel most things have a double meaning; not only was Nicodemus there under cover of darkness, he was also “in the dark” when it came to understanding who Jesus was. He doesn’t seem to be interested in trapping Jesus into saying something incriminating, the way others are described occasionally in the gospels. Nicodemus seems genuinely interested in learning what Jesus has to offer. He knows which way the wind blows.

Yet when Jesus tells him about the need to be born from above, or born again, Nicodemus is confused. What is obviously meant figuratively, he takes literally. That’s a common misconception in John’s gospel. Jesus is forever speaking in metaphors that the people around him hear literally. That’s not so much our problem nowadays. These days we tend to take figuratively what he meant literally, such as feeding the hungry and liberating captives. We like to spiritualize Jesus’ calls for compassion rather than hear them as calls to action. But here, in this encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus is mostly concerned with the condition of our spirits.

Why is it that Nicodemus cannot seem to grasp Jesus’ meaning? What is he clinging to that prevents him from fully embracing this invitation to new birth? Nicodemus stands on the periphery of Jesus’ teachings. He’s still assessing if this is a valid path for him when he’s devoted his life to an understanding of Torah and of God that requires certain behaviors intended to separate him from a world he believes is unrighteous. The Pharisees were opposed to the temple establishment, for instance, because of its collaboration with Roman authorities. They continued to worship at the temple and make the sacrifices, but they also developed a prayer life in the home and study of Torah as a way to dilute the temple’s importance for spiritual

formation. The Pharisees were the origin of what today is rabbinic Judaism. Without their work Jewish faith probably would not have survived the destruction of the temple in 70 AD.

So, there's a lot at stake for Nicodemus in meeting Jesus and trying to learn from him. When Jesus tells him he must let go of his past life and be born all over again, Nicodemus's confusion is understandable. One commentator, Deborah Kapp who taught at McCormick Theological Seminary where I attended, observes, "If any character from the Bible can be regarded as representative of twenty-first-century church members, it might be Nicodemus." She goes on to compare Nicodemus in his compartmentalized, hidden faith to many modern Christians who want to take hold of a deeper expression of their faith, but are held back by what it might cost them in friends or prospects. Jesus invites us to embrace his call fully and to reveal God's kingdom unfolding around us through our actions in the world.

And that famous verse—"For God so loved the world..."—may not be meant to convict us, as it's so often used, but as an assurance that love has already won and we don't need to worry about that anymore. God's love has won and a life that's whole and lasting, eternal life, is available to us; it's within our grasp. So, when Jesus tells Nicodemus, who's essentially disappeared from the conversation at this point, "Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already," he's not so much creating a dividing line that's absolute as he's simply observing a reality we all know exists. When we cut ourselves off from God's love and refuse the invitation to live anew, we condemn ourselves to darkness. But the light of God's love is always available.

The question Jesus leaves with Nicodemus and those of us who follow in his footsteps is can we discern which way the wind blows? If the Spirit is moving and calling us to new birth, what will we do? In a world where the light has come but we still love the darkness, how do we step into the light? We know our love of darkness isn't because we're evil anymore than Nicodemus was evil by coming to Jesus by night, but the darkness is familiar and secure. Darkness doesn't ask anything of us. We can live in the shadows, hanging back when real needs occur and loving action is called for, our whole lives. No one will condemn us for keeping quiet; we'll only condemn ourselves. But when we know God's Spirit is calling us to speak or to act, will we be ready for rebirth?

Being born again is a process, a continuing effort, we are called to engage every day. Coming out of hiding and showing our true selves takes time. But the wind is blowing in a new direction and the time to come into the light is upon us now. Can we embrace Jesus' invitation to live in the light? Can we risk our security, our status, our comfort to speak for those who have no voice, to stand up for the downtrodden and forgotten, the vulnerable and neglected? And when we do, can we put our trust in God's love revealed in Christ who sacrifices everything for us and shows us the path that leads to life that's whole and lasting?

We only run across Nicodemus two more times in John's gospel. One time he's defending Jesus' movement from his colleagues on the Council who want him arrested. He just reminds them that their law doesn't hold a person guilty without hearing them out. He's accused of being deceived, one small step into the light and he's already threatened. The last time we meet him he's with Joseph of Arimathea helping to prepare Jesus' body for burial. Nicodemus

brings “about a hundred pounds” of spices for that purpose. It’s a huge amount. Maybe it’s his first full step toward rebirth.

If there’s hope for Nicodemus, then there’s hope for us all. The winds of change are blowing. God’s Spirit is moving among us and within us to reveal God’s kingdom in this place. Do you know which way the wind blows? A new life is waiting. Step into the light and be born again.

Amen