

Home Service for March 1, 2026

Welcome and Announcements

You may also find listening to some of your favorite hymns helpful in worship.

God calls us and blesses us, that we might share our blessings with others.

Call to Worship:

God calls us to set out in faith. The love of God leads us home. Christ blesses us that we might bless others. The blessings of Christ heal our world. The Holy Spirit strengthens us for the journey. The power of the Spirit sustains and supports us. The One who made heaven and earth meets us here.

Opening Prayer:

Lord of light and love, your Spirit enlivens our spirits, even as your kingdom draws us to you. May we be born from above, that our souls might ascend to your realm and taste the joy of eternal life in your name. For you sent your Son into our world, not to condemn the world, but that all who enter into his light we might have life, and have it abundantly. Amen.

Prayer of Confession:

Maker of heaven and earth, when we face times of trial, lift our eyes to the hills to find our help. For you meet us in our need, and you lift us from the cares and toils that weaken our spirits and sap our strength. Call us this day as you called your followers of old, for we long experience your awesome power and respond with faithful hearts and willing spirits. Bless us each day, that we might share the promise of your blessings with a world struggling to find its way. Amen.

Words of Assurance:

Just as the wind blows where it will, God's Spirit moves in our world, calling us into ever deeper life with Christ. Hear and claim this good news. It is freely given.

Read Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?

²My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

³ He will not let your foot slip—
 he who watches over you will not slumber;
⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel
 will neither slumber nor sleep.
⁵ The Lord watches over you—
 the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
⁶ the sun will not harm you by day,
 nor the moon by night.
⁷ The Lord will keep you from all harm—
 he will watch over your life;
⁸ the Lord will watch over your coming and going
 both now and forevermore.

Prayers of the People:

Lord, like the lawyer Nicodemus, we come to you in hidden ways. We have lots of questions and concerns. We aren't sure that you will even listen to them or that you will think our queries are foolish. New life sounds wonderful. We have made messes in this life, some of which we have cleaned up, but there are others that we have swept under the rug, hidden away in the closet, hidden from ourselves and we believe hidden from you. But you know us better than we want to be known. You know our thoughts and actions. Help us, Lord. How can we turn things around so that there is peace and hope? We offer to you concerns for family, community, and nation; and yet we don't really expect that anything will change. We are unwilling to change ourselves, and so change for the world appears a wispy dream. Bring your presence powerfully to us. Convince us of the hope that rests in you alone. For we offer this prayer in Jesus' Name. AMEN.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is The kingdom, and the power and the glory forever and ever. AMEN

Read the Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 12:1-4a

The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

²“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.^[a]

³I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”^[b]

⁴So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.

Read the Epistle Lesson: Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? ² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. ³ What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”^[a]

⁴ Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

¹³ It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. ¹⁴ For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, ¹⁵ because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷ As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.”^[a] He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

Read the Gospel Lesson: John 3:1-17

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.^[a]”

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^[b] gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You^[c] 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.”^[d]

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.^[e] ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,^[f] ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”^[g]

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.

Message

While preparing for today’s sermon I read about a famed preacher named Fred Craddock who was known as the preacher’s preacher, for he always left his audience with something to think about, he often described the tendency for us humans to try to shrink the Christian faith down to a manageable size, we try to fit it into the tiny boxes of our impoverished religious imagination.

Craddock was known for his sharp wit and told about people who had boiled the Christian faith down to slogans, of those who have taken the spacious and infinite promises of God and reduced them to bumper stickers. I enjoyed his example when

he stated that this shrink-wrapped faith is easy to identify like when the back bumper of a car reads “God Is My Co-pilot,” to which he added, “So, Mr. Driver, that must mean that you are the pilot. I think I’ll take another flight.” Why, because as he stated God should be the pilot of our lives. And how often these boiled down slogans truly miss the point of our faith.

This morning’s gospel is a familiar text. And like all familiar stories from the Bible, we often have this tendency to presume that, since we have heard it before, we already know what it means. And I have to disagree with that thought for as I read each lesson I read it with the hope that I will find a new insight to the scripture. Just like we have discovered during our Bible Study, each time we watch that week’s DVD section of the Chosen, we seem to discover something we missed the last time we watched it, or someone else sees something we had missed. The same is true with the reading of the scriptures, too. We need to be open to discover something new each time we read them.

And perhaps this is where we might enter our Gospel lesson for this morning. I have found during my lifetime that God’s Spirit is continually challenging us to expand our preconceived understanding of Scripture, to help us grow in faith. In other words, God’s Spirit helps us to break open those tiny boxes that Craddock described, to gain a glimpse of the infinite promises of God.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. He is a respected man, a leader of the people, a religious authority and teacher, who knew the Law. Maybe Nicodemus did not even know how to tell Jesus that he hungers for the love of God, or that he thirsts for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, or that he wants to find a merciful Lord. Nicodemus does not come out and ask Jesus anything. He comes proclaiming knowledge of who Jesus is. And even though he does not come right out and ask, the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus revolves around the simple question: “How can I be saved?”

And to this end, we might do well to consider how we ourselves might identify with Nicodemus. Here was a man who was highly versed in the Scriptures. He was a leader of the Jews, perhaps a member of the Sanhedrin, the group that decided issues of faith for the life of Israel. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, and says to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God’ for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

Nicodemus establishes the conversation on grounds in which he feels safe and comfortable: a conversation between established authorities. He gives Jesus the title “rabbi...teacher.” But he speaks as one who has power and tradition on his side. As he says: “We know...” he is speaking for and from the established group.

He brings to the table a fixed understanding of what can and what cannot happen in the world and in human experience.

Thus, the very opening lines of this story present Nicodemus as the spokesperson of a fixed, immutable world, confident of its knowledge and closed to anything surprising and new. The rest of the story, and actually the whole Gospel of John, is about that tightly bound world coming totally unraveled. At each turn in the road, Jesus confronts Nicodemus' boxed view of reality.

And how does Jesus confront those closed boxes of Nicodemus' fixed understanding of the Scriptures? He tells Nicodemus that "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus responds to Jesus by asking, "How can one be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be reborn? Nicodemus, it seems, is totally confused by Jesus' statement. But then, we should not blame him. Another learning moment, for the Greek word that John records Jesus using here, "anothen," can have two connotations or definitions. One spatial, meaning "from above." The other temporal, meaning "again." Thus, Nicodemus could easily have taken our Lord's statement in earthly terms. Nevertheless, his box of preconceived ideas was totally shaken. Even different versions of the Bible have chosen the different meanings.

The mainline Protestant churches do not talk much about the idea of being "born from above." And we have good reason not to dwell on it, because the New Testament does not dwell on it. The word "anothen" occurs only twice in the entire New Testament, and both of them are in this passage. But you would never know this by some Christians. They have turned this phrase into a box of their own, thinking they captured what it means.

Personally, I believe that the mainline Christian Church is correct in not emphasizing "being born from above" as an event in one's life that needs to occur in order to see the kingdom of God. And I say this, not because of the phrase's double meaning, but because as it appears in the Greek in which this text was written, the phrase involves a present participle, meaning that it is an ongoing process. It does not describe a one-time event. So, the phrase is correctly translated "born from above, or being born." It implies an ongoing process of our rebirth by God's Spirit, throughout our life.

Jesus tells Nicodemus, being born from above is a lot like the wind. "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The wind of the Spirit is like our winter winds, at times subtle, mysterious, always changing, rarely the same two days in a row. It is the wind of the Spirit, which can blow into your life and mine in ways that are so subtle that you hardly notice until one day you open your eyes and begin to see things differently.

And this is what happened to Nicodemus. Even though he thought he had a deep understanding of what it meant to be a person of God, even though he was a theological scholar and a member of the Sanhedrin, the Spirit of God continued to challenge those tiny boxes in which he had put his trust, and at the end of John's Gospel, Nicodemus again appears, as a disciple of Jesus, who worshipfully cares for his dead body.

The Spirit of God is like the wind. It comes and goes, constantly challenging our attempts to confine and minimize our conception of the Gospel. It is the promise of God to walk with us throughout our life, ever opening new doors to understanding his grace at work among us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray: Dear Heavenly Father, in our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus, your beloved Son, you have redeemed us from sin and death, and claimed us as your own. Through the power of your Holy Spirit, help us to realize that our new birth in baptism continues to unfold throughout our lives, and that you will never abandon us. This we ask, in Christ's holy name. Amen.

Benediction:

Go now in the mercy of God, whose promises never fail, to live as people who have generously received and thus generously share God's gracious gift of new life with all we encounter. Amen.