

March 1, Lent 2A (John 3:1–17)

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night because all new life begins in the dark.

by [Serena Rice](#) in the [March 2026](#) issue

Published on February 23, 2026

In a small but evocative detail, John tells us that Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night.

This description invites us to imagine his approach to the teacher as covert, to envision him moving down a quiet street from which people have retreated, perhaps softening his footfalls and keeping to the concealing shadows. There is a furtive mood captured by this setting. If not outright secretive, Nicodemus's approach in the dark at least suggests the desire to avoid the attention he would draw in the day.

This setting might also be seen as foreshadowing Nicodemus's hesitancy to commit to a response to Jesus. In the preceding chapter, the responses to Jesus present two extremes, both definitive. When Jesus disrupts the temple marketplace, the people there angrily demand a sign to establish his authority, and they scoff at his claim to be able to raise the temple in three days. At the same time, John reports that many people do believe and that they are convinced by the signs Jesus is performing.

Nicodemus, in contrast, seems to want to walk a middle line. He seeks out the teacher and acknowledges the authority established by the signs Jesus works, but then he challenges the teaching Jesus offers him and argues its impossibility. When Jesus instructs his visitor on what is necessary in order to “see the kingdom of God,” might he be intentionally confronting Nicodemus's preference for obscuring darkness? In this teaching, Jesus subtly calls into question whether Nicodemus actually does want to see, or if he prefers to stay in the dark.

But the darkness and hesitancy in this story may also be seen as inviting. In *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor observes that “new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.” There is a nurturing quality to darkness that holds space for beginnings and transformations. The hiddenness of darkness makes it a relatively safe context for vulnerability. In the darkness, Nicodemus can hesitate and ask questions to which he does not know the answers. He can set aside his authoritative position in the community and confess that he does not understand. Darkness may make it easier to embrace the vulnerability that is necessary for him to experience the birth of the Spirit into which Jesus is inviting him.

We see Jesus himself pushing Nicodemus toward a confession of ignorance with his argument from the mysterious quality of the wind (?????? in the Greek text). If Nicodemus can recognize the presence of the wind through the limited evidence of its impact, why can he not accept that the Spirit (also ??????) produces new birth in ways he cannot comprehend? Jesus wants Nicodemus to admit his limits and to relax into the familiarity he already has with trusting things he does not fully understand.

As the conversation evolves, Nicodemus's problem seems to be not so much that he does not want to see clearly as that he wants to continue to trust the clarity of his own vision. In response to this reluctance, Jesus asserts that he himself is the only one who has already seen. Nicodemus will not be able to logic his way into the revelation that he seeks. The familiar life in which he perceives, teaches, and judges truth is not the one in which he will be

able to see the kingdom of God. He needs a life from above, one that requires faith. This is what lies at the bottom of the analogies of darkness, birth, and wind. The ultimate invitation to which Nicodemus must respond is an invitation into trust.

The question of trust was already introduced in the preceding chapter. In the verses that lead into Nicodemus's visit by night, an important Greek verb, πιστεύω (*pisteúō*), is used twice. In one instance it describes those who *believe in* Jesus because of his signs; in the other it reveals that Jesus does not *entrust* himself to them because he knows all people. It is the same word in both verses because *belief* in this context means trusting or putting one's faith in another. It is exactly the same word used when Jesus explains to Nicodemus, in what has become perhaps the most famous verse in all scripture, that anyone who *believes in him* will have eternal life. This is the heart of Jesus' teaching: a call to trust.

Jesus calls for trust from a person who approaches by night, seeking the safety of the shadows. He calls for trust from a person who wants to apply the logic of the flesh to life born of the Spirit. He calls for trust, because trusting him is ultimately at the center of the life that Jesus came to proclaim. In the dark, we have to trust what we cannot see, and that is where new life begins.