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Providence Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2026
Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17

"Grace From Above"

I'm giving you fair warning. This morning I'm going to make you think. "What would you do if you were absolutely certain that Jesus were returning today?" What would you do? Would you tell others? Would you get down on your knees? Would you try to make amends with someone? What do you need to do to get prepared for Jesus' return? In fact, that is a question that most of us ask in one way or another about life and life eternal: "What do I need to do?"

Many years ago, under the cloak of night, a man named Nicodemus approached Jesus with that very question in mind: "What must I do to enter the kingdom of God?" But he didn't even get to ask it. Jesus anticipated the question before Nicodemus even got the first sentence out of his mouth. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The Gospel writer, John, included the fact that it was night when Nicodemus visited Jesus for two reasons: to show symbolically that Nicodemus was in a state of darkness seeking light; and to suggest that Nicodemus was fearful of being seen in Jesus' company. This midnight meeting had a certain secretive, clandestine quality to it. It is not hard to imagine that as a Pharisee, Nicodemus feared he might jeopardize his standing among his colleagues if he were seen seriously conversing with Jesus.

Yet, the unmet yearnings in Nicodemus' soul, the truth and power he felt from Jesus and his message, made Nicodemus take the risk. He opened his conversation with a little bit of flattery, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these things apart from the presence of God." Perhaps he was sincere in his praise, or maybe he thought he would gain an advantage by "buttering up" Jesus a little.

We don't really know Nicodemus' motivations, but we do know that he was a man who was perplexed and seeking help in the middle of the night, much like we do with God when we toss and turn over a problem or crisis. "You want to get into the kingdom?" asked Jesus. Simple. You must be born, not again, but "*from above*." The mistranslation of the Greek word as "again" has misled lots of folks into conversations about being born again when Jesus was saying "you must be born from above."

The Greek word "*anōthen*," means "from above" or "from the top to the bottom". It is the same word used on Good Friday when the veil of the Temple was torn *anōthen*, "from the top to the bottom." Jesus told Nick at night, you have got to be born *from above*, from the top down, from the top to the bottom."

As so often happens in the Gospel of John, somebody hears but doesn't listen. When Jesus first said born from "above," Nick thought he heard him say, "again." "How can you be born a second time?" Nick queried. "No," Jesus said, "turn up your hearing aid. I said born *from above*."

Jesus said, "You must be born *from above*, '*anōthen*.' Flesh is flesh. But Spirit is spirit." What God wants to do with us is a renovation involving an attic to basement overhaul. Top to bottom, *anōthen*, "*from above*." Fine. How? "You do it the same way you got born.

What did you have to do to get born, Nick?" "I didn't do anything to get born." "Right! Getting into my Kingdom is a lot like that, only more so, top to bottom, *anōthen*." "Come again?" "Like wind. The wind blows where it will. You don't know from whence it comes. You don't know where it goes. You can't control it, predict it or harness it. Getting into my Kingdom is a lot like that, only more so."

Isn't it interesting that when Nicodemus asked, "how to be born from above," Jesus responded by citing two mysterious, uncontrollable events in life - birth and wind. If it were a matter of how - a technique, a method, Jesus wouldn't have called it birth or named it wind. We must be born *from above*. And we are.

That's what's so confusing about it. For we are such high achievers, do-it-yourselfers, and pragmatic people, that we assume that **we** have to **do** something. Is there a technique? Can we read a book about it? Are there illustrated directions? Is there a You Tube video? No, we just have to be born *from above*. **We** don't have to **do** anything. We simply must be.

Think of it this way. Imagine that you buy a nice piece of property in the desert and build a home. The only problem is that try as you may, you can't locate water on your property. You hire the best consultants and even hire a "water witcher" but are unable to find even a drop of water. Then, one night, when hope seems exhausted, you hear the sound of running water - right inside your home. When you turn on the lights, you discover a small stream of clear, fresh water running right down the decorative waterfall you built in your new home.

Through no efforts of your own, you have received that which makes life possible. Being born *from above* is like that. We have an amazing source of energy and fulfillment within our own home which comes from above. It is a gift. It is something that we can never

"get" but only be given. The only thing we need to "do" is accept the gift which God has given to each one of us.

Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about this remarkable gift when he said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life." The gift of eternal life is ours just for being born *from above*.

Thus, when Nicodemus raised his question late at night, "Teacher, how do you get into the kingdom of God? What do you have to do to get whatever it is that you have?" Jesus, being the good preacher that he was, replied, "I have three things to say about that. Point one: you have to be born from above to see the kingdom. Point two: you have got to get the Spirit. Point three: the wind blows where it will."

That was Jesus for you. Ask him a simple, straightforward question like, "What have I got to **do** to get what you have," and he answers with riddles. But the riddles point to an essential truth: the only thing **we** have to **do** to get what Jesus has is accept it. That is Grace from above for all of us here below.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being where you are. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen