

Sermon:
Born Into a New Imagination

Hebrews 2:16–18; 3:1–6 John 3:1–17

Lent has a way of slowing us down. It invites us to look again at things we think we already understand—our lives, our faith, our assumptions about God. It is a season that gently but persistently asks us to pay attention. And today’s readings do exactly that. They invite us into a conversation about identity, liberation, and the kind of humanity Jesus reveals. These are not abstract theological puzzles. They are deeply pastoral texts, written for people who feel overwhelmed, uncertain, or excluded; for communities longing for renewal; for a world still wondering whether God’s love is truly wide enough to hold us all.

Hebrews gives us a Jesus who stands in radical solidarity with human beings. John gives us a Jesus who invites us into a new way of seeing—a new imagination shaped by God’s love. Together, they ask us not simply what we believe about Jesus, but what kind of people we are becoming because of him.

1. A Christ Who Stands With Us

Hebrews begins with a striking claim: Jesus did not come to help angels, but human beings—“the descendants of Abraham.” He becomes like us “in every respect,” so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest. This is not Jesus pretending to be human. This is Jesus entering the full weight of human experience—our vulnerability, our griefs, our temptations, our fears.

Gustavo Gutiérrez once wrote that “God’s love is effective; it is a love that takes sides.” Hebrews shows us a Christ who takes the side of humanity—especially those who suffer, those who are marginalised, those who feel the pressure of life pressing in on them. Jesus is not aloof. He is not distant. He is not waiting for us to get our act together. He stands with us in the mess and the mystery of being human.

And Hebrews 3 deepens this picture. Jesus is faithful in God’s household—a household not defined by purity codes, doctrinal gatekeeping, or social boundaries, but by belonging. “We are God’s house,” the writer says, “if we hold fast to our confidence and hope.” Not certainty. Not perfection. Hope.

Hope is a fragile thing, but it is also a powerful thing. It is what keeps us moving when the path is unclear. It is what allows us to imagine a different future. It is what enables us to believe that God is not finished with us yet. And in a world that often divides, excludes, and categorises, this is a radical word. God’s household is wide. God’s household is spacious. God’s household is built on mercy, not merit. And if we are that household, then our calling is to build communities where all people—

regardless of gender identity, sexuality, race, disability, or background—are welcomed as full participants in God’s life.

2. Nicodemus and the Courage to Ask

Then we meet Nicodemus. He comes to Jesus by night. Traditionally this has been read as cowardice, but perhaps it is something more tender. Nicodemus is a seeker. He is curious. He is willing to ask questions that others avoid. Rowan Williams once said, “Faith is what happens when we allow ourselves to be questioned by God.” Nicodemus embodies that openness.

Jesus speaks to him about being “born again” or “born from above.” Over the centuries, this phrase has been used as a boundary marker—who is in, who is out. But in the original Greek, the phrase carries the sense of being born into a new way of perceiving reality. Marcus Borg captures this beautifully when he writes, “To be born again is to enter into a new way of seeing, a new way of being.”

John Dominic Crossan describes it as “entering a new world of justice and compassion.” It is not about a private spiritual moment. It is about stepping into a new imagination shaped by God’s love.

Nicodemus, a respected religious leader, had spent a lifetime accumulating spiritual capital—credentials, reputation, authority. But none of that counted for anything in the kingdom Jesus described. To be born again is to relinquish the illusion that we can save ourselves, fix ourselves, or climb our way into God’s favour. It is to let go of the old scripts and step into a new story.

And that is frightening. Lent does not hide that. Lent confronts us with our limits—not to shame us, but to prepare us to receive grace. Lent reminds us that transformation is rarely tidy. It often begins in the dark, in the quiet hours, in the questions we whisper rather than shout. Nicodemus comes by night, but the night is where new beginnings often take root.

3. God So Loved the World—All of It

And then we reach the verse that has been both cherished and weaponised: “For God so loved the world...” In Greek, the word is *cosmos*—the whole created order. Not just the religiously observant. Not just the morally respectable. Not just the people who look or think like us. The whole world.

Elizabeth Johnson reminds us that “God’s love is not a reward for good behaviour but the very ground of our existence.” John 3:17 reinforces this: Jesus comes not to condemn the world but to heal it, restore it, renew it.

This is the heart of the Gospel: not fear, not judgement, but love that liberates.

And yet, when we place John 3:16 back into its original conversation, we discover that Jesus speaks these words not as a slogan but as a summons. The belief he calls for is not vague optimism. It is the radical trust that his death—his humiliating, helpless, scandalous death—will somehow be our salvation. The way into God’s kingdom runs straight through death—his death, and our own dying to self.

Nicodemus had to face that truth. And perhaps that is why he slips away into the night without a recorded response. John leaves the story open-ended, because the real question is not what Nicodemus did with Jesus’ words. The real question is what we will do with them.

4. What This Means for Us Today

a) We are called to embrace humanity, not escape it.

Hebrews shows us a Christ who enters human struggle. spirituality is not about fleeing the world but transforming it—standing with the oppressed, challenging injustice, and embodying compassion.

b) We are invited into continual transformation.

Nicodemus reminds us that faith is a journey, not a destination. Being “born again” is not a one-off event but an ongoing openness to the Spirit’s work in us and through us.

c) We are challenged to widen our circle of love.

If God loves the whole cosmos, then our communities must reflect that breadth. Churches are called to be sanctuaries of inclusion, where LGBTQ+ people, migrants, the poor, the lonely, and the questioning find not suspicion but welcome.

d) We are stewards of hope.

Hebrews calls us to “hold fast to our confidence and hope.” In a world marked by climate anxiety, political polarisation, and social fragmentation, hope is not naïve—it is prophetic. It is the belief that God’s love is still at work, still healing, still creating new possibilities.

5. Born Into a New Imagination

Nicodemus came by night, but he left with a spark of new light. Hebrews shows us a Christ who stands with us in our darkest moments. John shows us a God whose love is wider than we dare imagine.

Sallie McFague once wrote, “God’s love is the energy that empowers us to reshape the world.” That is the invitation of Lent: to be born into a new imagination—one shaped not by fear, scarcity, or exclusion, but by the boundless love of God.

So, may we be people who live from that love.

May be a community which embodies that love.

And may we, like Nicodemus, keep asking questions that lead us deeper into the mystery of God’s grace.

Amen