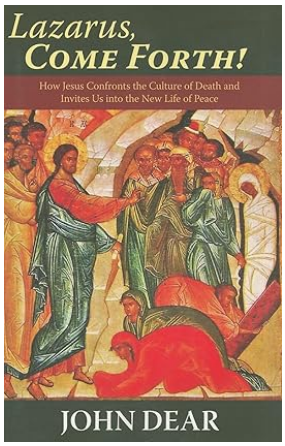
Excerpt Page for Lent 2 — March 1, 2026

Theme for Lent: "Called Out from Our Cultures of Death to God's Reign of Life"

Excerpt from John Dear's book on the Gospel of John, *Lazarus, Come Forth!: How Jesus Confronts the Culture of Death and Invites Us into the New Life of Peace* (Orbis, 2011), pp. 23-25, 34.



We meet first the fearful and complicit Nicodemus. John composed him as a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council employed by the Roman empire to enforce its occupation. . . .

[T]he Gospel writer implies he should have known better. Instead, what do we see? A man who hears the rumors of Jesus' action in the Temple and who is now frightened and confounded. Nicodemus shrewdly arranges a meeting to get a handle on the man — a secret meeting under cover of darkness. The Gospel writer is tipping us off: Nicodemus lives in darkness, not "in the light."

Jesus receives him nevertheless, and the discussion begins. "You must be born from above," says Jesus. The Greek for "from above" also means "again." And confusion churns in the Pharisee's mind; he can't grasp this talk of rebirth. Grammatically it baffles him, but he also can't get hold of the spiritual and political implications. "How can one enter the womb and be born again?" A member of a powerful institution, he's long been in unholy alliance with the Roman empire and turned a blind eye toward its terrors. At the same time he's a student of the Torah, a religious elder, supposedly the epitome of godly living. But before Jesus' wisdom he flounders. He strains to understand but hasn't a clue.

Now at an impasse, the two part ways — Jesus to go on building his movement of enlightening nonviolence, Nicodemus to continue his deathly living in darkness. It is beyond Nicodemus to convert to Jesus' way of nonviolence, the way of eternal life. He can't surrender to his status as a child of God. He ruefully chooses otherwise; he remains complicit with the culture of death, whose father is Satan.

There is in Nicodemus's liberal heart some sense of the culture around him and some inclination to temper its harshness. As Jesus' trial approaches, for instance, Nicodemus admonishes his colleagues to adhere to some semblance of due process. And when that fails, he takes it upon himself to help anoint Jesus' brutalized body. But his good gestures fall short. Jesus asked of him radical discipleship — a clean break from complicity. One can't have it both ways. One can't enter fullness of life and still cling — in his case, by belonging to the Sanhedrin — to the trappings of imperial domination, and power.

God's purpose isn't domination but life, eternal life now — the purpose behind the famous words Jesus speaks to the hapless Pharisee: "For God so loved the world, he gave his only Son that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." In the cycle of domination, we perish. The Son shows us new life in a world without the downward spiral of violence. Such new life requires that we withdraw from all imperial aspirations and the deadly methods such aspirations employ. Eternal life requires that we live within the boundaries of nonviolence and unconditional love.

A momentous choice and Nicodemus faltered. His heart grew faint, and so does ours.

Summary ending of chapter 2, which gives an overview of John 2–10, before moving onto John 11, the raising of Lazarus:

As we arrive at chapter 11, we realize we have not made a long journey to Jerusalem, where Jesus engages in civil disobedience in the Temple. Instead, we've seen a series of subversive teachings and signs, nearly all of them causing crises and confrontations and death threats and assassination attempts on Jesus' life. Like the characters who struggle to believe Jesus' words and deeds, we too find his teachings hard to accept. We too struggle to understand who he is and what this promise of eternal life means. We too find it hard to imagine standing with him as he faces the rulers and their death squads. We do not know what resurrection is, much less what a more abundant life might feel like. We cannot grasp what it might mean to never taste or see death.

Few today appreciate this fundamental teaching. And how strange, since we live in the technologically deadliest generation of all time, in a world on the brink of "nonexisterice." We of all people should understand the grip of death. Who ever needed this good news of "the fullness of life" more than us?

We've made a bargain with death, the same as the authorities in the narrative of John's Gospel. Some of us are wary of the implications of life. Others among us despair that change can happen, that nothing can be done. So what's the use of getting involved? What's the use of granting Jesus a hearing? But John's Jesus dogs us all our days. The God of life has overrun our deathly world, and his mission still stands: "I have come to bring you life, and life to the full."

Brace yourself, John announces, your resurrection is at hand.

Thank God for the Good News of resurrection beginning here and now! Please continue to join us each week on this Lenten journey. Invite family and friends.