

“Nick at Night”
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Trinity Lutheran 3/16/14
John 3:1-17

Sisters and brothers, Grace and peace to you from God who is our help and Christ our light, amen.

What is it about the night that invites questions? As our head settles into the pillow and shadows stretch out on the bedroom wall, questions, like field mice, begin to emerge from the nooks and crannies of our mind. At first, they are practical: Did someone feed the cat today? Are the kids' lunches packed for school? When am I going to fit in a work out this week? And then, without warning, the questions morph: Is he going to recover from this illness? What if they do restructure and I'm cut out after all these years? Why are my prayers so short these days? Naked honesty feels much safer, comes more easily, in the night.¹

Maybe that is why we can relate to Nicodemus. For when did Nicodemus come to Jesus? By night! Though it's easy to treat this detail in setting like a speed bump on our way to the larger story, or famous John 3:16, it is rather important. Nicodemus needs to know more about this the rabbi from Galilee who had begun to cause a lot of talk. Yet Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a leader in the religious establishment, one who is supposed to know what is going on as far as God goes, already. How would it look to associate with Jesus? And so, with shadows dancing in the torchlight, Nicodemus makes his way to Jesus, beset by questions perhaps he can ask only under cover of darkness, the time of doubt, uncertainty.

I wonder what your comfort level is with uncertainty. Ambiguity. Questions. On the one hand, it's human nature to seek resolution to the unresolved, anything! For example if I did this: [clapping], what might many of us feel compelled to do? [finish the clap sequence]. From resolving a chord on the piano to any argument you find yourself in, it feels better at the end of the day to have things tied up neatly with a bow, and it feels good to be in the know. If you were like my brother and wife right now, pregnant, would you be able to resist finding out boy or girl, or not? Seeking answers to life's questions/problems is normal.

What happens when significant engrained ideas, are called into question? Up is up, down is down, north is north, south is south—isn't it? [Picture of an 'upside down' world map displayed] Sometimes a circumstance or a new revelation sets all of what we had thought we previously known into question, and that is jarring. This is the unsettling experience of doubt. The question is, where does such an experience belong in our journey of faith, and what we think we know about God?

¹ Paraphrased “Questions Come to Light,”
http://members.sundaysandseasons.com/planner_resources_view.php?event_id=1471, (March 12, 2014).

Let's walk through the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, and see if any light can be shed on that question: Nicodemus begins the dialogue with a statement about who he sees Jesus as: that is, a person with God's presence about him (though not necessarily the Messiah mind you). You would expect Jesus answer with something like, "Well, yes indeed, Nicodemus, God's presence is with me, and in fact, (as only John would have him say), I am the way, truth, life, the light of the world." Instead, what Jesus actually says is something about being born from above. "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." I imagine a pause there (because that was probably not the answer Nicodemus was expecting) before Nicodemus does respond in a seemingly dense way, "How can one be born a second time? Can a person re-enter into their mother's womb?" Now here, it would be easy to look down on Nicodemus, from our 2000 years of perspective. Clearly Nicodemus is really not getting that the "being born from above" thing is a metaphor for how life changes following Jesus. If Jesus told him he was the 'lamb of God,' Nicodemus would probably run for the wool shears, too!

But what if Nicodemus wasn't so slow-on-the-uptake as to think Jesus was being literal in this 'born again' talk. What if his response was keeping right up with Jesus, asking Jesus a serious question, right back.

How can someone after growing old, start over again? Nicodemus has been thinking about God a long time. He's gone through the schooling, obtained not only degree but been made to be a teacher and leader; he has the know-how to have all the right answers, the right practice, the right way of thinking about God and God's activity in the world. And so he asks, how can someone, after having grown old, after *all* this—be born again into a new understanding. (It reminds me of doing long division these days: I learned it one way.... and what it would take for me to use this lattice method that's come about, wow!).

One commentator reflected, that: '[People] like Nicodemus have identified themselves with definitions they know too exactly. They want someone new to confirm a notion already fixed inside the heads of those who know best...'²

Yes. That describes many of us I think, if we're honest. Who wants to be born again after having 'grown old,' in any idea or way of doing things!

Jesus replies to Nicodemus, "Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above....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 it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

² Luke Timothy Johnson. *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke* (Order of St. Benedict: 1991), p. 91.

The Spirit/God is like the wind. Jesus is reintroducing Nicodemus to a God who cannot be pinned down, a God who is on the move, who cannot be domesticated by definition or parameters of religion no matter how established. It's not like Nicodemus didn't know this God: that's the very God who would have moved over the waters at creation, in a pillar of fire and cloud in the wilderness, would trust only transient tent for his dwelling place for decades in the tabernacle.

But this God--and his activity within Jesus— makes Nicodemus uncomfortable, flabbergasted, actually. *How can this be?* Nicodemus last words in this section are not rejection or anger at Jesus, but those of stunned puzzlement.

Karoline Lewis reflected that, “We tend to talk about “our faith” or “having faith” assuming that is a done deal, assent to the right belief and you are set. But here we learn again with Nicodemus, that no matter who you are, faith is not a possession and it is not static. Believing must be a verb, and as such, subject to all of the ambiguity, the uncertainty, and the indecisiveness of being human. And trusting in a living God can be like trying to hit a moving target some days. Perhaps we need to ask more than we are willing to admit, “how can these things be?”³

The unsettling experience of doubt--where does such an experience belong in our journey of faith? Jesus is the one who institutes it here in Nicodemus. In fact, Jesus loved to go around rattling the certainty of the religious. What if, the living Christ does the same today. Is that what we're seeing on a large scale with this new Pope? If Christ is on the move, shaking things up as always, might even we who are lovers of resolution and answers make room within ourselves for some portion of uncertainty, mystery, and paradox when it comes to faith?

One of my favorite quotes: “I wake up every morning, wondering what it is I'm dead wrong about.”

The dynamic of trusting and knowing God will always have an element of uncertainty, for this believing in a higher power is not an exact science or a static creed: in Christ, it is a relationship. One thing not to doubt: it is a relationship of love, grace. [John 3:16]

As for Nicodemus? We only hear from him twice more in the gospel of John. Once, is in chapter 7, when all the Pharisees and religious leaders are chomping at the bit to be rid of the trouble-maker Jesus, Nicodemus steps in—not going all the way to defend Jesus directly, but he does call the council on their own rules of order, a political maneuver that probably bought Jesus some time. The last time we see Nicodemus, is at the foot of the cross. According to John, it is Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus, who take away Jesus' body. And it is Nicodemus--the one who first

³ Paraphrased from Karoline Lewis, “Commentary: John: 3:1-17”, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=43 (2008).

came to Jesus in secret--who now for all to see buys an exorbitant amount of spices to anoint his body.

Would he have done that, had the Spirit not gotten to his heart? Did the one who went to Jesus first at night, in doubt, see him as the true light in the end? We don't know. But we can be encouraged and challenged—to open ourselves up, knowing the night time of our own questions will come, and yet in trust, we are invited to let the Spirit blow in our lives with abandon, wherever it might lead. Amen.
