



**The Second Sunday in Lent  
John 3:1-17**

**Seeking Jesus in the Night**

At 11:23 p.m. tonight, Coordinated Universal Time—which translates to 4:23 p.m. this afternoon, Pacific Daylight Time—the direct rays of the sun will fall on Earth’s equator. At that precise moment, we human earthlings in the northern hemisphere will observe what we call the spring equinox.

I wonder if I will enjoy the empathy and shared relief of most of us gathered here when I say—

It. Is. About. Time.

For many of us—here and abroad—it has been a long, dark winter. (For our sisters and brothers in Japan, I fear winter is just starting.) Did you experience winter this way? I know that when the sun came out yesterday, I was fortunate enough to be riding the Bremerton ferry, so I was able to stand in the shining sun and soak up the warmth. And I noticed that it was still quite light outside as late as 6:45 p.m. Spring is coming. It is just hours away.

I have noticed the darkness this winter much more than I usually do. It’s partly the La Niña weather pattern that brought multiple downpours to Seattle, flooding our basement not one but two times this year. It’s also, alas, my first winter as a 40-something. So I greet the spring this year with great relief and rejoicing.

And so, I think it’s fitting that we encounter Jesus in today’s Gospel in the nighttime, and that Jesus in turn encounters Nicodemus, a leader of the Judeans, a Pharisee and scholar of the Torah, in the dark of night. And since today’s Gospel reading comes from John, we can rest assured that there is something significant about the fact that Nicodemus approaches Jesus in the night—every detail in John’s Gospel, no matter how small, carries a symbolic weight. Nighttime in John can signify several things, depending on the story: later on, when Judas goes out to betray Jesus and night falls, the night represents the triumph of evil at that hour. But the night into which Nicodemus wanders is more like the night of ignorance, or the night of fear.

And I think we can relate to that. How many nights have you had—literal or otherwise—when you felt out of sorts, anxious, uniformed, just, you know, “in the dark”? Or even *terrified*?

This is the first of three appearances Nicodemus makes in the Gospel of John (and we don’t meet him at all in the other three Gospels). When he appears a second time, it is daytime, and he advocates for Jesus, reminding his colleagues that Jesus deserves a trial before being found guilty of a crime. And finally, he brings spices to anoint the crucified body of Jesus. All of this suggests that in Nicodemus we encounter a character who goes through a developmental process: he first approaches Jesus by night; then defends him in the light of day; then anoints him seemingly at the end of the story...anoints his body with the reverence of a companion.

But today, Nicodemus is still a night-walker. Limited—and *also sheltered*—by his night of fear and ignorance, he seeks out Jesus and engages him in debate. And I invite you to hear in today’s Gospel the formula that Nicodemus and Jesus are following. They are using a form of dialogue that was known to both of them. It begins with a salutation: Nicodemus says, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” It sounds like a simple compliment—and it is that—but it is also an opening salvo, a kind of good-natured dare to begin a scholarly discussion. And Jesus jumps right in, saying, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus’s response sounds confused, even naïve: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?” But I wonder if you can hear in these questions a note of sarcasm. Nicodemus doesn’t yet understand what Jesus is saying—he doesn’t get it, yet—but neither is he a fool. He knows full well that Jesus is not speaking literally. Come on...anyone knows that, right? So his questions to Jesus are a kind of gentle taunt. “Say more, wise guy,” is the subtext I think we are supposed to be hearing. “Say more about this ‘born from above’ business.”

And it’s at this point where I have to acknowledge the superior insight of one of my colleagues. It hurts to admit this, I suppose, since I’d like you all to think that of the Unholy Three of Stephen, Stephanie, and Stephen, I am, naturally, the fairest of them all. But it was our own Stephen Shaver, not me, who came up with an elegant little insight about the phrase, “born from above.” We had a little chat about this the other week. He studied the Greek word for this phrase—*anōthen*—and suggested that, because it has two possible meanings—both “from above,” and “anew, again”—that a good way to combine both meanings is to translate it as, “from the top,” that is, “no one can see the kingdom of God without *taking it from the top*.” Conversion. A re-do. A do-over. That’s most likely what’s being said here. If we want to participate in God’s kingdom, we have to *take it from the top*, the way our choir does in rehearsal when they fumble a passage and Les has them run through the whole thing again.

And in Nicodemus we see that to do this, one must first approach Jesus and ask the question. One must first be subject to the choirmaster, be willing to let him stop us and invite us to try again.

But...try *what* again, exactly? What is it exactly that we’re being asked to *do over*, to *take from the top*? Well, Nicodemus, a scholar and religious leader, knew that his way of seeing things, his way of doing things, was being challenged. That’s why he sought the cover of night. It’s embarrassing, when you think about it. You’re well regarded by your people; in our parlance, you’re a PhD or an MDiv, and in Jesus you encounter a compelling figure who’s saying, “You’ve got it all wrong.” It makes sense that Nicodemus, that poor benighted scholar, approached Jesus with caution.

But it depends, really, what it is that you’re being invited to “take again from the top.” What is

*your* “night”? For me, in the night, I am usually seeking...redemption, I think. Or pardon. I’m looking for reassurance, for acceptance. Give me insight, Jesus. But more than that, give me pardon, and peace. What about you?

And...I don’t want it to escape our notice that when Nicodemus searched for him, *Jesus was available*. Jesus was walking in the night too. Not benighted, of course, but *not indifferent* to Nicodemus. And so, I wonder—and I invite you to wonder—where do you find yourself in this story? Are you like Nicodemus, wandering through the night, anxiously trying to find out what needs a do-over in your life? Are you, like him, aware of your limitations, aware of your nagging questions, and bucking up the pluck and the courage to ask the hard questions?

Or are you like Jesus, or like Nicodemus later on in John’s Gospel? I wonder if you have learned a lot, and grown a lot, in the grace of God, here in this community, in your workplace, in your home, or through bitter experience? If so, are you available—are *you* awake?—to greet others who still wander in the night, looking to you for wisdom, to share with them the good—yet odd—news of the wild Spirit of God, blowing grace into our lives from all directions? Are you willing, like Jesus, to accept the invitation to dialogue?

Or...are you like the colleagues of Nicodemus, and the companions of Jesus, both of whom are conspicuously absent in this story? Like the sleeping Pharisees, are you resisting the challenge of the Gospel, the goading of God, to take things “from the top” in your life? Or, like the sleeping disciples, are you resting on the laurels of membership in the community of believers, sleeping peacefully while others seek you out?

Wherever we find ourselves in this story, I want to draw our attention back to the *developmental progression* of our friend Nicodemus. He didn’t have it all worked out from the beginning, but in his decision to listen to Jesus, he moved ever so slowly into the daylight. Wherever we find ourselves in this story, I invite us to explore the possibility of movement, movement toward the next step in our life with God.

And so, friends, I greet you on this bright morning, just hours from the warm season of spring. And yet, as warm as spring might be, many of us, I think, still cling to the chill of winter. For many of us, the darkness of night—the darkness of what we don’t know, and the darkness of our deepest fears—is dreadful. We come to this Table with many unanswered questions, and will be sent from here—I will not lie to you—with fewer answers than we want. Like Nicodemus, we can’t figure it all out in one night.

But we walk into the night nonetheless, whether to seek wisdom, provide that wisdom to others, or something in between. And perhaps, if we keep looking, we will see the kingdom of God—we will participate in God’s bright vision for a world enlightened by God’s dawn of grace.

What do you say? Shall we take it from top?

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