

A Nighttime Visit
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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John 3:1-17

Imagine a righteous man. Really, he's righteous. And sincere. And disciplined. And devout. He's read the scriptures. He clings to Torah, the good parts of Torah. He's spent a lifetime seeking to find the presence of God in the written Word of God.

Over the past seven centuries, four foreign powers – the Babylonians, and then the Persians, and then the Greeks, and eventually the Romans – have sacked his homeland, and forced assimilation on his people. And little by little, the God of Moses has been watered down, and it seems He's barely recognizable.

This man, his name is Nicodemus, and others like him, they call themselves Pharisees, seek to set themselves apart. They seek to hang on to the laws, customs, and traditions that God gave Israel through Moses. And you ought to see them interspersed in the middle of Greek culture. They are pretty noticeable. But they are also appreciated by the local people. For they are not like the Sadducees, the descendants of Zadok, the ones who lord their priestly privileges over others. These Pharisees are not noble by blood, but rather noble by action. They earnestly seek after God in their every action. And Nicodemus is their leader.

One Passover season, Nicodemus hears of a Galilean teacher named Jesus. Jesus has performed healings and miracles. And just the other day he cleansed the Temple. Nicodemus is smart enough to know that Jesus is not an ordinary man – something God-infused is going on here. And Nicodemus is curious. He wants to meet Jesus. He has questions for him.

But if the Pharisees have a fault it's this: their rigor in following the law can sometimes make them blind to common sense, or insensitive to the changing needs of the world. Sometimes that means they pursue a law over its intent, and sometimes their sought-after separation has an opposite effect: God is no longer exclusive, but instead, God becomes elusive.

So Nicodemus seeks Jesus in night-time cover. It's probably best that they not be seen together in public. After all, Nicodemus is learned and devout and respected. And Jesus, well Jesus, is a wild card. You never know what kind of company he'll keep, and you never know what controversial lesson he'll teach.

Nicodemus asks Jesus, "Hey man, what's your deal? How is God working through you?"

Jesus says, "If you want to experience the truth, you need to be born of the spirit."

Nicodemus is confused. "I am an old man. And I know God can do a lot of things, but I'm not sure sending me back through my mother's womb again is one of them."

Jesus says, "I'm not talking about a physical birth. I'm talking about a spiritual birth."

"I still don't follow," says Nicodemus.

“You’re a smart man, Nicodemus,” says Jesus, “But you are being too obtuse. You know Torah, but you don’t experience it. You live it out as if it’s an instruction manual that will create carbon copies of God’s people and God’s possibilities. And you act as if God can only be revealed within your specific framework, within your formulas and comprehensions.”

“But here’s the deal. God’s just bigger than that. And in me and through me, God is revealed. God has come to tell the world that God is available to all who will acknowledge me. For in knowing me, and in experiencing me, you also know God. And in knowing God, you are quite literally born again. For your spirit is no longer beholden, no longer held captive to the systems of this world. Instead, it is invited to enter a new life, a new world, where God is accessible, and where God understands the human experience, because God has lived it.”

“And one more thing. God did not send me here to condemn. God sent me here to love. And in that love, God shows how one can turn away from the destructive habits of this world – hate, greed, apathy, and turn toward the regenerative habits of God’s world: hope, kindness, empathy.”

The text doesn’t tell us, but Nicodemus’ night time visit most likely didn’t provide an immediate light to his faith. He mostly likely left this encounter confused. But don’t be too hard on Nicodemus. It’s not so easy to be born of the spirit. It’s not so easy, because it’s not about how smart you are, or about how hard you prepare, or how hard you work, or how many pieces of scripture you memorize, or who your parents are, or what it says on your birth certificate. Being born of the spirit is not something that you can plan or pre-ordain.

Instead, it’s something that requires you to be vulnerable. And it’s something that requires you to not only intuit, but to also feel. And it requires you to just let it happen. And you never know when that moment will strike.

And if you are a man like Nicodemus, that may not be something that happens in a lightning-strike moment. Too often we remember Paul, or the Centurion, or the Blind Man, characters whose faith changed in a flash.

But for others, the coming to faith is an arduous process. It certainly was for the disciples. And they had front row seats and private lessons. It would only be after Jesus was gone that they realized in whose presence they had been. And John Wesley spent the better part of his twenties seeking assurance. “Why won’t it find me, he wondered?” And then one night, while walking along Aldersgate his heart was strangely warmed.

And I think that’s where our story leaves Nicodemus, somewhere on that path between doubt and belief. He wants to embrace the truth Jesus proclaims, but he is hesitant to abandon the comfort he finds in the smaller truths of this world. He is a timid seeker. He is a baby bird. He knows flight is possible. He’s just not confident it’s his wings that will make it so. And so he hovers.

John’s is a gospel of process. It’s the idea of seeking to discover who Jesus is, and letting that reality transform your being. Sometimes that process is as quick as conversation at the well. At other times it takes an afternoon. And still others, it takes the whole of the story. And maybe even sometimes, it takes the hearing of this Gospel over and over again.

To read John's gospel is to engage in such a process. To read John's gospel is to hear confirmation that Jesus lived and dwelled and still lives and dwells among us. To read John's gospel is to hear how that story transformed and still transforms the lives of others. And to read John's gospel is the opportunity to put yourself into such a story.

And the story begs the question. Where are you today? Are you ready to experience the light of God in full light? Or do you prefer to linger in the moonlight a little while longer?

Douglas John Hall reminds us that God's truth is not something we can hold onto. Rather, God's truth has a hold on us. Friends, whether you are lingering in the light, or dancing in the dark, may God's truth grab hold of you tight in this Lenten season. And when it gets a hold of you, may you bring it to our table. Lord knows we could all use a second helping.

May it be so. Amen.