

Say What? The Story of Nicodemus
John 3:1–17

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In this passage from John we meet Nicodemus, who ventures into the night to go see Jesus, this new teacher who's been stirring up all kinds of mischief, like healing the blind and the lame, turning water into wine. He even went to the temple and drove out the people selling animals to be sacrificed for Passover, and turned over the tables of those exchanging currency. Who *is* this man, anyway, and what is he teaching? Well, if Nicodemus thinks this guy's *actions* are hard to understand, just wait till he has a personal conversation with him.

But first, we need to know who Nicodemus was. He's identified right away as a Pharisee and a teacher. Pharisees were members of a Jewish group who were committed to keeping the Law of Moses down to the last detail. That meant following all kinds of regulations around washing, food, tithing, and a host of other things. The Pharisees kept a close eye on Jesus and often criticized him for not obeying the law. For example, the law forbade work on the Sabbath, and Jesus healed people on the Sabbath, even though the Pharisees considered that work.

As a leader Nicodemus is respectable and educated, secure in his righteousness and his knowledge of who God is. Given all that, it's surprising that he pays Jesus a visit—and not to hassle him, apparently. In fact, he addresses Jesus respectfully, calling him Rabbi, which means “teacher.” The writer of John doesn't tell us exactly what's on Nicodemus' heart, or why he shows up at nighttime. Nicodemus seems to be curious about Jesus for sure, but writer Amy Zietlow says there's more to it than that. She writes that Nicodemus is moved by Jesus's presence and abilities to question his own position and learning. Despite all he has accomplished as a scholar of the law, and his busyness with its finer points, maybe he's feeling a sense of hollowness or like he's missing out on something. Maybe he's wondering, *Is this all there is to life and faith? Is there, can there be, something more?*

As for his timing, the common assumption is that Nicodemus visits at night because he doesn't want anyone—especially his fellow Pharisees—to know he's meeting with Jesus. But in her book *Holy Envy*, Barbara Brown Taylor says, “It is also possible that Nicodemus came by night because he knew that was a better time to talk about things that matter. How often have you asked something by candlelight that you never would have asked under the light of a fluorescent bulb? Sometimes darkness is the perfect blanket for conversations you cannot have in the broad light of day.”

Taylor explores darkness from a range of different perspectives in her earlier book called *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, in which she invites readers to learn to walk in the dark, both literally and inwardly, as a spiritual discipline. She suggests that there is no light without darkness first. Taylor writes, “New life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.”

The darkness in this passage from John may also represent Nicodemus’ spiritual darkness. Despite all his training and scholarship, he can’t figure out what Jesus is saying to him. He’s in the dark. We can probably all sympathize with Nicodemus. I mean, he shows up with curiosity and openness, only to get what sounds like crazy talk from Jesus. Like us, Nicodemus is limited by left-brain thinking, taking words literally, and the desire for everything to be black and white, to fit into a box.

Jesus’ language, in contrast, is disorienting and seems to be all over the place as he skips from topic to topic with poetic images and metaphors about wind and water and Moses lifting up a snake. Nicodemus may have arrived with talking points, but he’s quickly thrown off balance by what sounds like a bunch of nonsense. I imagine he might have been terribly disappointed and felt like the whole encounter was a waste of time. Maybe he even left thinking, *Well, that’s 10 minutes of my life I’ll never get back.*

It may sound like Jesus is just messing with him, but New Testament scholar Chris Blumhofer writes that Jesus is intentionally using his words to disorient and then reorient Nicodemus, to urge him toward a new life in God’s love and God’s vision of the world. Our darkness and confusion is an opportunity to examine old beliefs, old ways, to reevaluate what is most important about life. This is a chance to surrender and be transformed, to loosen our grip intellectual solutions and rules, and to realize that what’s called for instead is listening, trusting, and perhaps simply sitting in the darkness for a while.

Admitting we’re in the dark is the first step toward the light. And Nicodemus is certainly honest about his bewilderment. He may not realize it at the time, but he has indeed taken a step toward his new life. Although the gospel writer doesn’t tell us how his conversation with Jesus ends in this passage, Nicodemus appears twice more in John. When his fellow Pharisees want Jesus arrested in chapter 7, Nicodemus says maybe they should give him a hearing first. That’s a risky thing to say, and indicates that he is gradually finding his way through the darkness toward new life. Then in chapter 19, we see that he is finally willing to trust Jesus and embrace new life, because after Jesus is crucified, he and Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus’s body before laying it in the tomb. In fact he brings nearly 75 pounds of myrrh and aloe with him—an extravagant amount—which he uses to anoint Jesus before wrapping him in linen cloths. As a Pharisee, he’s again taking a risk, and you don’t do this kind of act for someone unless you love them.

Nicodemus started with questions and confusion but grows into this relationship with Jesus and new life.

So what can we learn from the story of Nicodemus? Nicodemus is respectable, devout, law-abiding, and well intentioned, if misguided. For one thing, this passage shows that God sent Jesus for good, respectable people without any obvious needs, not just the disreputable, the poor, and those whose need for saving and healing seem obvious. We all need God's grace, and we're all invited to receive and participate in God's love. The risk of being like a Pharisee—obsessed with the rules and what we think it means to be holy—is self-righteousness but also rigidity and limitation. Life isn't found in the law, the rules, but through the spirit of God, which is creating a whole new way of being, a whole new community, a whole new kingdom of the Divine.

Nicodemus is also a rationalist. He wants it all to make sense, to fit into his view of the world. We too often want reasons for, evidence for, arguments against, and so on. We want to feel like we understand, have things settled in our minds, have answers. Yet we're being told to let go of what we know and all the trappings, and start from the very beginning. We're asked to admit that we don't know everything and to trust that we are actually freed by that unknowing.

You may remember we touched on this in one of our discussions in January, after watching the first interview with Rachel Held Evans. One of the questions was something like "Are there things you were once certain of that you don't know about anymore?" And so it is with this passage. Jesus is telling Nicodemus to let go of what he knows for certain and to trust that yes, there is a new way of being and living. What did we used to be so sure of that we aren't sure of anymore?

Some of us here at Centre Street may be facing uncertainty and questions in our personal lives as well as in our life as a congregation. We wonder if our job or career still makes sense. We're worried about loved ones or about our own health. We wonder where we will be in five years. Maybe we're just restless or confused. Wouldn't we love to get some good, quick, solid answers.

But we are asked to be willing to tolerate mystery, not knowing, not having everything make sense. We are asked to believe that God can do things that we don't believe are possible—restore a relationship, heal a loved one's addiction, soften a heart, whether someone else's or even our own. God works through us and with our cooperation—after all, we are called to be God's hands and feet in the world. But we are challenged to open ourselves to new and more abundant life, to imagine that God can work in places where we have given up hope or to do things we think are impossible. Can we accept what *is* and remain open to change at the same time?

Nicodemus learns to walk in the dark by admitting that he has questions and that he doesn't know all the answers. Darkness can be a place of fear, despair, and uncertainty. But the night is also a place of spiritual discovery. And it is a place of encounter with the Divine.

Being afraid of the dark can prevent us from finding the light we need. In this season of Lent, we're invited to let go of our limiting rules and beliefs, to trust, and to learn how to walk in the darkness together. Friends, be assured that even in the night, God is using the dark to create new life and lead us toward light. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.