

Maybe Nicodemus just couldn't sleep.

Nicodemus was tossing and turning on his matt because he just couldn't put it together. He was a respected religious scholar. He had been to the best schools and studied with the best professors. He had risen to the top of his profession. His was a combination of spiritual passion, legal clarity, and a wisdom seasoned by tradition. He could smoke out religious charlatans and build a consensus among the faithful. His hand was on the tiller of his community and yet Jesus was keeping him awake at night.

For, something about Jesus was different: He taught with an intrinsic authority. He seemed to be able to cut through the chaff and get to the kernel. He was mysterious and unsettling and charismatic. The miracles he performed weren't parlor tricks; they were expressions of power that seemed to point to something else. He sparked awe and attraction and fear and...

And, Nicodemus didn't know what to make of Jesus. If Jesus were on a prophet from God, then Nicodemus didn't want to be on the wrong side of him. If Jesus had come to speak a clear word about the tenuous and tricky relationship that the Hebrews had forged under the Romans, then Nicodemus wanted to listen. There was something about Jesus that he couldn't shake or he wanted in on.

So, one night Nicodemus couldn't take it anymore. He pulled a coat over his night clothes, and with a quick shot of courage he snuck out of the house. He slipped through the moonlit shadows of Jerusalem to where Jesus was staying.

He was just looking for a private word.

He was just looking for some answers.

He was just looking for some peace.

He was just looking for a good nights sleep.

He was just looking for God.

Maybe Nicodemus just couldn't sleep.

Most scholars suggest that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night because he was a coward. He was afraid of the implications if his colleagues caught him cavorting with this rabble-rousing-radical-rabbi. Jesus had just made a mess of things in the temple and he was stirring up the commoners. He seemed to tap into the people's longing for change; he was unmanageable; he was a threat to the ruling religious elite. There would be hell to pay if Nicodemus was seen talking to Jesus.

Maybe Nicodemus came at night because, metaphorically speaking, he was in the dark. The exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus is choppy and disjointed. It is clear that Jesus has a different agenda. It is clear that Nicodemus doesn't follow what Jesus is saying. It is as if they are using different languages in the same conversation. Nicodemus is not dense or a bumbling buffoon, but he seems stuck in a metaphorical murky gray twilight.

Martin Luther, the 16th century reformer, suggests that Nicodemus was in the dark because this exchange represents the tension between reason and revelation: In his words:

The longer Nicodemus associates with Christ, the less he understands Christ... Reason is so blind that it can neither perceive nor understand the things of God, nor all things which properly belong to its own sphere... This is a blow to nature and human reason, which have been rated so high by philosophy and the wise men of this world; the wise

ones have said that reason always strives to attain the best...God has here given us an example showing that even the best in nature must fail.

Seeker, coward, or just in the dark? Nicodemus may have come at night because he was a coward, but I'd rather see him as the patron saint of seekers than the poster boy for spineless religious professionals....

Maybe Nicodemus came at night because he was one of us.

Maybe you came to church this morning ~ hoping, seeking, longing to encounter Jesus. Maybe Jesus keeps you up at night not as a source of comfort but a source of unsettledness and fear. Maybe you are just befuddled by Jesus and all this fuss about faith.

Well, seeker, scared, or just in the dark ~ what might this text say to us?

It is remarkable to me that this nocturnal conversation leads to a line that is now spray painted on walls, and hoisted up on signs at football games, and embroidered on sweatshirts and throw pillows. It's probably a toss up between John 3:16 and Psalm 23 as the most familiar texts in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. But, most of the time, "For God so loved the world..." gets pulled out of context and its connection to this exchange with Nicodemus gets lost.

So, seeker, scared, or just in the dark ~ what might this text say to us?
Let me offer a couple observations.

Chapter divisions in the Bible are the work of editors and not of the original writers; and this text seems to be clearly linked to the last lines of chapter two.

Chapter two ends with:

For he knew what was in people' (anthropo).

Chapter three begins with:

Now there was a person (anthropos).

Nicodemus is an example of what was in people. And, at issue is faith that is based on signs and miracles. As it reads:

Many believed in his name because they saw the signs/miracles which he was doing. But Jesus, himself, did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and had no need for anyone to testify to him about a person, for he knew what was in people. Now there was a person...

John is setting up Nicodemus to move the discussion of faith beyond belief in signs and miracles and toward something deeper and more substantial. So, Nicodemus knocks on the door to say:

Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs/miracles you are doing if God were not with him.

Now, that is not bad confession of faith in the middle of the night. It certainly isn't negative or challenging or misguided. It seems to follow from what the first couple chapters portray.

So....

This is not Nicodemus, the unbeliever, but Nicodemus, the believer.

This is not about a lack faith, but about a conversion or correction of faith.

This is not about trying to buffalo Jesus, this is about trying to understand Jesus.

This exchange is about the identity of Jesus and the implications of that identity.

And...

If the primary evidence of God in Jesus is miracles, then miracles will form the focus of faith.

Faith becomes what God does in the extraordinary. Faith becomes the expectation of the sensational. Faith is based on what God is going to do next. Faith in miracles makes us passive observers. Faith in miracles expects stimulation.

But....

In response to that faith ~ Jesus says that you need to be born again.

You need to be reconnoitered.

You need to see differently.

You need a different way of knowing and being.

You need to be baptized into a whole different kingdom.

When I was in junior high I wanted to be part of a different family. I wanted to be a Hatton. The Hattons lived down the street. They were Catholic. They were colorful. They were loud. They got church out of the way late on Saturday afternoon. Dickie Hatton had some elusive cool ~ that I longed for. And, I had a crush on Dasha Hatton in her plaid skirts and knee socks. They grilled in the back yard, and watched Notre Dame football, and drank beer, and with all those kids there was always a buzz.

But, I was born into family of serious thoughtful Christians who prayed and read the Bible and studied and were out of step with predominant dance of culture....

When I was a child I thought as a child and reasoned as a child and I wanted to be born into a different family.

But, being born is not a matter of the will. We don't choose how, when, or where to be born. Henry Richard (who we just baptized) is a gift of God and an expression of the will of Steve and Lori. He didn't make his appearance by his own decision or determination.

The images that Jesus uses to respond to Nicodemus reference two mysteries beyond the exercise of our wills: wind and birth.

Who of us chose the how, when, why, and who of our birth?

Who of us controls where the wind starts or where the wind blows?

Jesus doesn't really answer Nicodemus's initial question, but he points again and again to a reality that is outside, above, beyond, and removed from Nicodemus's control.

The kingdom of God is born of above.

The kingdom of God blows in where it pleases.

The kingdom of God is a gift.

For God so loved the world that he gave....

Maybe that is what kept Nicodemus up at night.

All he could do was receive a new way of being. Not based on law, not based on family, not based on effort, not based on achievement, not based on obedience, not based on getting it right. But, from front to back, from top to bottom, from beginning to end, it was a matter of God's in-breaking in Jesus Christ. It was a matter of grace to seekers, cowards and those in the dark.

Back to Martin Luther. He puts it this way:

The carnal, natural man cannot believe that God will gratuitously take away and forgive us all our sins. Reason argues in this manner: You have sinned, you must also atone for your sin. Then it invents one good work after another and endeavors to take away sin by good works. But the Gospel of Christ is: If you have fallen in sin, another must atone for you, if a man believes this, he becomes one with Christ, and has everything that is Christ's. This Gospel, then, signifies that our works are nothing, and that all human power can do is useless, but faith in Christ does it all.

In her last days last week Edythe Medema reminded her daughters that faith is not a matter of the will, or strength, or clutching some idea tightly, but faith is a matter of trust. In her words, "It is easy to say you have faith, but trust is what you live."

It is more about your heart than your head.

It is more about falling than standing up.

It is more about birth and wind and gift....

We buried Edythe in that deep trust yesterday.

We baptize Henry Richard into that deep trust today.

Seeker, scared, or just befuddled may that deep trust be born, blown, and given to all of us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.