

John 3:1-21

Nic @ Night

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When I was a teenager, arguing with my parents about what I considered their unfair imposition of a curfew, my stepdad liked to say, “Nothing good happens after 11 o’clock, Kelley.” Of course, I disagreed. I felt like a lot of good stuff happened late at night, after I went home.

(to Alex and Anna) Did your parents say that to you?

Now, with a few years under my belt, I realize he was right. Nothing good happens, nothing as good as pajamas and an early bedtime at least.

Today’s story in the Gospel of John happens at night. Throughout this gospel, darkness, like the darkness of night, symbolizes the inability to see and believe what is right there. In contrast, light, like the sun at midday, symbolizes seeing and believing. We will look at darkness and light side by side as next week’s text is set outside at Jacob’s well, at noon. This week, though, we meet the character known as Nicodemus. We shall help ourselves remember this story by calling him Nic @ Night.

Some scholars have suggested that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night because he didn’t want to be seen talking to him. Certainly, that’s a possibility. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, one of the keepers and teachers of Jewish law, who we learned last week, had a tense relationship with Jesus. Nic’s peers might not have appreciated him seeking out Jesus. I tend to think it is more likely this story is set at night to signal to the reader that the outcome of the conversation is not likely to be positive. Nothing good happens late at night.

Nicodemus appears only in the Gospel of John, and he appears in three separate stories. In this story, the character serves to contrast the old, which Jesus challenges, with the new, to which Jesus points. This is John 3:1-21.

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “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.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the

kingdom of God without being born from above.”⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’⁸ 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.”⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

There is a lot going on here, but what I want us to notice first is that Jesus and Nicodemus are having a conversation. And it’s a pretty lengthy one. That would suggest, and we will see this in other passages in John, there is something theologically important in dialogue. In her commentary on John, Dr. Karoline Lewis writes, “Revelation, understanding, possibility, and openness happen in conversation. Conversation itself is indicative of theological curiosity and not doctrinal conclusiveness.”¹ Talking with other people about what we believe and why is important, not because we have to convince others to believe what we

¹ Lewis, Karoline, *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries: John*, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2014, 46.

believe, but because often it is through conversation that we experience something new about God, other people, and ourselves.

(To Alex and Anna) I wonder, are there people in your life who identify as Christians, but who have no interest in being part of a church?

I talk to people who feel that way all the time, “I love God, but I don’t want anything to do with the Church.” Or, “Sunday mornings are the only time I have to get caught up on laundry or to take a walk.” If we believe God connects to all of us in our own ways and we believe God is everywhere, then it seems like being a Christian is not dependent on being in Christian community. But the story of Nicodemus, reminds me that very often it has been in conversation with other people that I have had a change in perspective or thought new thoughts.

Before COVID, one of my favorite parts of the week was meeting with the sermon talk-back group on Wednesdays. The group would meet to talk about the sermon from the Sunday before. It was a great opportunity for to clarify points that I managed to muddy in my sermon and to share some of the things that didn’t make the cut. The group asked questions and very often presented a different perspective on the text. It helped me as I worked on the sermon for the next Sunday.

(To Alex and Anna) Have y’all had that experience, seeing something in a new way, as a result of conversation with others?

As I mentioned before, Nicodemus’s conversation with Jesus did not yield positive results. In fact, he walked away from the conversation pretty much clueless. While he showed some openness in his willingness to have a conversation in the first place, he could never quite step out of the box in which he had God and himself. Jesus was messing with things that, in his mind, were unmovable, tradition and law. This what he knew, what he was taught. The conversation began, though, with the door cracking open just the littlest bit and a sliver of light shining through as he addressed Jesus “rabbi,” which was a signal that he thought Jesus was somebody with some importance. He acknowledged Jesus must somehow be related to God, for only then could he do the “signs” he did, which so far in the narrative have only been changing water to wine at the wedding in Galilee. He asked questions. He was curious.

“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Nicodemus struggled to understand what Jesus was saying and, truth be told, he isn’t the only one. Christians have struggled with and misunderstood these verses as well. “...no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit.” Nicodemus was like, “What? We have to crawl back into the womb?” And then Christians are like, “It means you have to be baptized. If you aren’t baptized, you don’t belong.”

Neither is exactly right. What I think Jesus was saying is that we are all born through water (the womb), that’s the biological birth process. But being born of the Spirit is something different. And this is where what I believe differs from what many of us were taught. Being “born of the Spirit” or “being born again,” is not one grand event in which a person proclaims they believe certain things about God and/or Jesus. Being “born of the Spirit” is about experiences. It is about experiencing who God is, what God is doing in the world, and what God is doing in our lives, in your life. And it is not a onetime experience. We experience God in all kinds of ways every day. And ideally, in these experiences, something new is revealed, some new possibility, some new understanding of God.

Nicodemus’s idea of God was a somewhat removed God through whom mighty, sometimes scary, things were accomplished. According to Bishop John Shelby Spong, in his book, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, “Nicodemus’s God needed to be harnessed, nuanced and feared. Divine acts had to be validated by ecclesiastical authority. Nicodemus would never understand the birth of new consciousness. [In the Gospel] Jesus is portrayed as recognizing these new attitudes immediately, and in the tension between Nicodemus’s controlled world and Jesus’s understanding of the power of new life, their conversation unfolds.”² The conversation between Jesus and Nic broke down because Nicodemus was unable to see that God could be anything other than what he knew. It isn’t that Nicodemus’s perspective was wrong, it was that it was incomplete. God will not be contained by Nicodemus’s ideas about God or mine or any one person’s or one religion’s ideas about God. God will be God in all kinds of ways. That is the kind of God Jesus came to reveal. Not a different God than Nicodemus’s, but another perspective, another experience of God that was bigger and more expansive.

² Spong, John Shelby, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper Collins: New York, 2013, 87.

This brings us to perhaps the most quoted verse in the Bible. And I can't leave this story without talking about it at least for a minute. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." This verse gets a lot of bumper sticker, billboard, and t-shirt space. And it could certainly be the subject of a sermon all by itself. As we think about Nic's inability to imagine God being different than his experiences of God, there is something we should know about John 3:16. The Greek word translated "world" is the same word from which we get "cosmos." "For God so loved the cosmos..." We tend to think of the world as the people of the world, but really this verse is about God's love for the entirety of creation and it's about all of creation's relationship to the Creator. This verse asks us to perhaps imagine that God is bigger and more expansive than we have experienced as well.

In the text we will read next week, the narrative will move away from Jerusalem into Samaria where Jesus will show us what the world that God loves looks like as he encounters the woman at the well. And we will see how her experience is different from Nicodemus's. It is no accident that these two stories are presented side by side in the Gospel of John. I want us to take our time with these stories, so next week we are going to slow down and practice experiencing God in a new way by worshipping in the style of Taizé'.

In the south of Burgundy, France is a small village called Taizé. This village founded over seventy years ago by Brother Roger is home to a monastic community devoted to prayer and reconciliation. The community is made up of brothers from all the continents and major denominations who gather three times a day, seven days a week, throughout the year to pray. While many people make pilgrimages to Taizé to experience the community and prayer life, most experience Taizé through the ways that community comes to us, namely by the characteristics it has contributed to Christian worship practices. While Taizé worship as practiced in the monastic community cannot be simply imitated, it can and has been adapted by many Christian communities.

Characteristics of Taizé' worship are: repetitive sung prayer, time for silence, and reflection on scripture, very often from the book of Psalms. Next week, as we experience this worship style, John 4: 1-42 will be our focus. There will not be a

sermon, but there will be time for reflection on the text. I hope you will reflect on John 4 by itself, but also in conversation with today's story of Nicodemus in John 3. The following Sunday, Feb. 6, I will preach on John 4:1-42. So, as I prepare for that, I would love to hear from you as you ponder these texts.

I will close today with a prayer, written by liturgist, John van de Laar:

Why do we settle, O God, for only being born once, or even twice,
as if the world never changes,
as if everything is just fine the way it is
and we have no need for new life,
new encounters with you,
new promptings of your Spirit,
and new awakenings in our souls?

Why do we turn your invitation into a mark of our own achievement,
as if your life is anything other than an extravagant gift,
as if the glimpses of your reign that we receive
are earned,
or deserved,
or make us somehow 'better' than others?

We praise you for the shocking miraculous truth, God,
that we can always be - that we need to always be
born again;
that daily you welcome us into a surprising new life,
the wonderful, creative, unpredictable world of your Spirit;
and that all we can do is allow ourselves to be pushed -
birthed, by your grace,
into new experiences of your reign.

Here we are, O God;
Let us be, once more,
in this moment, in this place,
Born yet again. Amen.