

March 26, 2017
John 3:1-17
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“In the Dark”

Good morning! As part of our Lenten series, “Gospel Matters,” we have been pairing gospel stories with gospel music. Even though much of this music came from communities of people who were poor, oppressed, and in some cases enslaved, the gospel is always good news: God is good all the time.

Last Sunday we talked about a conversation -- a long conversation -- which Jesus had with a Samaritan woman; a conversation and a relationship which transformed the woman and changed her from a skeptic to a believer. Her excitement changed her community. We’re going to consider another conversation today, also from the gospel of John. This conversation isn’t quite as conclusive as the one from last Sunday: we’re not sure quite where things end up.

Jesus’ conversation partner is Nicodemus -- what a character! In fact, there’s some speculation by biblical scholars that Nicodemus may not have been an actual person, but a character who represented Jewish rabbis who questioned Jesus’ ministry and authority. In any case, Nicodemus appears only in the gospel of John -- in chapter 3 and chapter 19 -- we’ll get back to that second one later. These one-to-one conversations with Jesus are fascinating for what they reveal about the other character, but especially for what they tell us about Jesus. When I was a seminary student, I asked a professor, a New Testament scholar, a question that had bothered me for a long time. You may have thought of it, too: How did the gospel writers know what was said in these conversations with Jesus and just one other person? Like this conversation with Nicodemus? Or last week’s conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well? Who reported those conversations? How about when Jesus was praying alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before his betrayal and

crucifixion? How do we know that he was asking God the Father for this cup to pass from him? These are good questions, right? I thought so.

When I asked my professor she gave me a look like you'd give to a smart-aleck kid in your Sunday School class and said, "Well, nobody really knows that, do they?" End of discussion. All that is to say that although these conversation with Jesus are very important -- this one in particular has been written about extensively -- there are still things which we don't know, which we're in the dark about. One of the things we're in the dark about is the darkness. Verse 1 says that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Why'd he do that? Was he ashamed to be seen with Jesus? Maybe he was secretly a believer and didn't want his fellow Pharisees to know. Jewish practice was that rabbis prayed seven times in 24 hours, including during the night: maybe this was one rabbi acknowledging and respecting the prayers of another rabbi. We don't know for sure.

What we do know from this conversation is that, like the conversation with the woman at the well, it begins in a fairly straight forward way, and then Jesus veers off in an unexpected direction. Nicodemus begins with a polite rabbi to rabbi professional courtesy: "Rabbi," he says, using Jesus' title, "We know -- " we, that's interesting, Nicodemus seems to be speaking on behalf of a group of Pharisees -- "we know that you are a teacher who has comes from God, for no one could do the signs that you do apart from God." Very well-mannered.

And then follows this conversation about being born again. Nicodemus, like the woman at the well, doesn't make the jump into the symbolic language immediately and wonders how this can happen -- an adult going back into his mother's womb? The exchange which follows, according to people who can read it in the original Greek, is an intricate word play about above and below and wind and Spirit -- these are similar pairs of words in Greek. Which may leave many of us ready to say, as Nicodemus did in verse 9, "How can these things be?"

I think our bewilderment, like that of Nicodemus, is not something to be afraid of. It's OK to be in the dark sometimes, especially if it gives us the humility to seek further light and understanding. There is truth

in this passage that has guided the church for centuries, and that is light for our path today. I believe that God gives us, in the midst of times which may seem dark or bewildering, clear signs of light and truth. Sometimes these signs are so clear that they're hard to ignore.

Let's talk about John 3:16, since it's the elephant in the room: I don't mean that personally, Tim. I bet many of you know this verse by heart. It's been printed on signs, T-shirts, jewelry. Some of you may remember Rollen Stewart, known as Rock 'n Rollen Stewart, the man in a rainbow afro wig who got into TV shots at major sporting events holding a sign which read simply John 3:16. He had to assume sports viewers understood the reference, and knew what that verse said. Do you know what that verse says? More importantly, do you believe what it says? Because if you do, you have the light of the gospel -- God's good news -- which is stronger than any darkness.

You may have memorized it in the King James version, or some other version. Here is what it says: say it with me, if you like: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life." These are words to live by. These are words to take us beyond death to God's promise of eternal life. This is the light of truth which shines in our fog of doubt or disbelief. These are the words of Jesus. He had been referring to an Old Testament account from Numbers 21, when the children of Israel were in the desert and were bit by poisonous snakes. When the people looked at a bronze image of a serpent held up on a pole, they were healed. They were saved. Nicodemus was a Jewish scholar -- he would have understood this reference immediately.

We humans have been poisoned with sin. Our healing comes through a human being without sin, who will be lifted up on a cross. If we believe that Jesus is the cure for our sin, we will be saved -- not just now, but for eternity. This is the light and the truth of the gospel. God's love is brighter and stronger than the darkness of our sin. This is certainly not the only place in the Bible that makes a statement like this. The stories of the Old Testament -- especially the exodus from Egypt which resonates so deeply in the American spiritual tradition, and the words of the prophets -- are all about the promise of God's

protection and salvation; sometimes with pretty strong warnings about sin thrown in there.

This is part of Christian spiritual tradition, too. Confessing our sin, asking for direction, giving thanks for salvation and protection.

These things may already be part of a prayer practices for you. There is a framework for prayer which was developed by Ignatius of Loyola, a Spanish soldier who was badly injured in a battle. He developed this practice during that long rehabilitation, and went on to found the Catholic order of the Society of Jesuits. The prayer of examen, or the daily examen is a way of beginning and ending each day with prayer. It incorporates thanksgiving, confession, seeking direction, and blessing. There are some guidelines in your bulletin: you may follow them as closely as you wish. I would offer this from my own experience of morning and evening prayer -- it's something which have tried to do with more or less success since I was a seminary student. If prayer is not already a part of your daily routine, it may seem like you can't add one more thing to your life. Don't get too hung up on the mechanics or the sequence or the words. But I would encourage you to connect prayer to something you do in the morning -- such as pouring a cup of coffee -- and something you do in the evening -- like brushing your teeth as you get ready for bed. If those simple actions, which are already something you do, can remind you in the morning to say, "God, thank you for the gift of this day. Guide me to live it as a follower of Jesus," and at the end of the day to say, "God, I'm sorry for the ways I fell short today. Forgive me and help me to do better tomorrow" then you have done a simple version of the daily examen. I believe that trying a simplest prayer, if it is genuine, is far better than not trying at all.

I know what you're all wondering: What about Nicodemus? That's what you were wondering, right? What is he doing in John chapter 19? This is the daytime result of Nicodemus' visit to Jesus by night: Jesus has been crucified, lifted up on the cross, and is dead. Joseph of Arimathea, who had been a secret believer and the Pharisee Nicodemus -- who we weren't so sure about after his nighttime visit of Jesus -- ask for the body of Jesus so they can prepare it for burial with expensive spices and linen cloths. They place the body in a tomb in a garden nearby. We'll be hearing a lot more about that tomb

in a few weeks. Nicodemus has moved from darkness into the light, from questioning to ministering.

The words of Jesus to Nicodemus are words which are still with us today. Words of promise and hope, light in our darkness. Praise God for the gift of this book, of the truth which has come to us through the prophets, for the promise that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life. Amen.