

Nic at Night

John 3:1-17

If you have been watching the video series, “The Chosen”, you are acquainted with the character Nicodemus. He is referred to as the “Teacher of Israel” and appears in several scenes giving instruction to other members of his sect. But unlike other members of his sect, Nicodemus is open to new learnings and the miracles being performed by Jesus are just too much for him to resist. It is this irresistible pull that brings him to request an audience with Jesus.

The story of Nicodemus comes fairly early in the story of Jesus’ ministry according to John. In John’s gospel, Jesus has called his disciples, turned water to wine at the wedding in Cana, and cleared the Temple of the money changers. This all appears to be in rather short period of time. Yet today’s story would indicate that Jesus’ ministry has been around long enough to gain a reputation with the religious leaders.

This morning we are looking at the Biblical story of Nicodemus coming under the cover of night seeking an audience with Jesus. There are two possible explanations for his coming at night. The first is that Jesus was constantly surrounded throughout the day by people seeking healing and listening to him teach. It’s possible that Nicodemus chose to wait until later in the day in order to have a better chance of having Jesus’ full attention. The second reason, and perhaps the more accepted of these two choices, is that Nicodemus was aware of the cost to him and his reputation if he were to be seen with Jesus.

We know only a little about Nicodemus. His name means “innocent blood”. His name only appears three times in the Gospels, all of them in the gospel of John. We know he was a Pharisee, a member of the religious ruling class. Pharisees were known for upholding the most ancient traditions of Israel, holding closely to the Law of Moses. Pharisees were also very concerned about and gave a great deal of attention to outward appearances. You may remember Jesus talking about them when he said this in Matthew 23:

Matthew 23:5-7 (NIV2011)

⁵ “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long;

⁶ they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues;

⁷ they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.

Sounds like a prideful bunch. To be seen with Jesus could be detrimental to Nicodemus’ standing in the community, at least with his peers. So, coming under the cloak of darkness makes sense for this man seeking to know more about Jesus and His message.

In this exchange Nicodemus speaks first saying, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” I find myself wondering if he is using the royal “we” to speak of himself, or if in fact there were

others of the ruling party that also felt that Jesus could be the Messiah they had been waiting for since the time of Moses. Maybe they had drawn straws to see who would go to speak to Jesus and Nicodemus had drawn the short straw. We don't know. The reason Nicodemus, and perhaps others, thought that Jesus had come from God was because they saw the miracles he had performed and knew He could not have performed the miracles He did were He not from God. But this is as far as his comprehension of Jesus and his mission will go.

Jesus is aware that Nicodemus is seeking answers, even to unasked questions. Jesus tells Nicodemus that a person must be born again in order to see the Kingdom of God. Not only that, but they must be born of both water and Spirit. Perhaps Nicodemus missed Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River where he was dipped in the water by John the Baptist, and rose to the descending Spirit of God blessing Him as he began his ministry. Water and Spirit.

Jesus explains that to see the kingdom of God one must experience a spiritual birth. He goes on to explain using symbolism from nature. We can't see the wind, he says, but we can see the results of its movement. So, it is with the spiritual birth. There is no obvious outward sign that it has happened, but there is evidence that a person has experienced a change as a result of the indwelling spirit of God.

This seems to confuse Nicodemus who, *dumbfounded*, asks, “How can someone be born when they are old? Surely, they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” Nicodemus, in the scene from *The Chosen*, asserts that as his own mother has since passed away, this would be impossible.

At this point, Jesus takes to some good-natured ribbing and asks Nicodemus how he can be so dense. As someone who knows the Law and would have participated in the baptism of new Jewish converts, it would be expected that he would understand about new birth. Water was the symbol of new birth for the convert. Through profession of faith and confession of sin, marked by ritual washing, the convert was born again.

Jesus goes on to explain that just as the Israelites in the desert were saved from physical death when Moses raised the snake in the wilderness, so everyone will be saved from spiritual death by believing in the One lifted on the cross for our salvation. This gift of salvation was not just for the Jews. Jesus tells Nicodemus that whoever believes, anyone in the entire world, will be saved. Or, in other words, anyone who has experienced the spiritual birth, being born again or born from above, will be able to see the kingdom of heaven.

We are not told how this exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus ended. Did Nicodemus go away sad like the rich young ruler after being told to sell all his belongings and give the proceeds to the poor? Did he go away still befuddled by Jesus' speech? Did he go away with a new and deeper understanding of who Jesus was and why He had come from God? In The Chosen he goes away a little bit of each, a man struggling with what he has known and with what he had learned and how that might change not only his life, but the lives of many.

Later verses in John give us a good idea of how Jesus and Nicodemus parted company. Here we see Nicodemus, now in the light, coming out in defense of Jesus, before his peers who sought to arrest Jesus:

John 7:50-52 (NIV2011)

⁵⁰ Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, ⁵¹ “Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?”

⁵² They replied, “Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.”

Nicodemus, it would appear, **had** grasped what Jesus was saying about being born again. Now numbered among the disciples of Jesus, having

himself been born again, he put himself on the line by speaking publicly in Jesus' defense.

The last time we hear of Nicodemus in John's gospel follows the death of Jesus.

John 19:38-40 (NIV2011)

³⁸ Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away.

³⁹ He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. ⁴⁰ Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.

Let me ask you this, can we see ourselves in the story of Nicodemus, the man who came under the cover of darkness, asking questions, wanting to learn more about Jesus? I think if we are honest with ourselves, we can acknowledge that each of us began in darkness, knowing nothing of Christ and what he has done for us. We came to Jesus in our own darkness, sat at his feet like Mary, and heard the Good News. But have

we, like the Pharisees, been more concerned with the outward appearance rather than the inward life? I think of when I was growing up and going to church meant wearing your “Sunday best” and anyone who wasn’t dressed “appropriately” was considered something just short of an infidel. Like Nicodemus, we have asked questions. While we may not always understand the answers, we have persevered to learn more, eventually experiencing a spiritual birth.

When we experienced this spiritual birth, we most likely acted to acknowledge the event. We were baptized with water, the outward sign of the inward change that we experienced. We were born of water and spirit.

This spiritual birth allows us to place more emphasis on the inward life. We understand the importance of this change since we know that God does not look on the outward appearance, but rather on the heart of his people. To our friends and family, we don’t look any different on the outside, but we have a new heart within us. Like the wind, this new heart can’t be seen, but we can see the affect it has on our lives.

Eventually, Nicodemus became a professing Christian, coming out publicly in defense of Jesus when he was wrongly accused and facing persecution. Have we progressed in our Christian walk to the point

where we, too, are willing to make a public defense of our faith? Even in the face of persecution and ridicule? This question carries increasing importance given the social climate we live in, both nationally and globally.

Finally, Nicodemus applied himself in service to Jesus. Joining with another Pharisee, although one not as open as he was, Nicodemus did the difficult and necessary task of preparing the Lord's body for burial. Are we prepared to serve Jesus, even if it is a difficult task? If it will expose us to the judgment of others that are not supportive of what we are doing? In what ways can we see ourselves acting out our faith in the coming weeks and months?

I'd like to share a poem from Lolita Hiroshi that sums up the story of Nicodemus and us, too. It's called the Land of Beginning Again:

I wish that there were some wonderful place
Called the Land of Beginning Again,
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door,
And never be put on again.

I wish we could come on it all unaware,

Like the hunter who finds a lost trail;
And I wish that the one whom our blindness had done
The greatest injustice of all
Could be at the gates like an old friend that waits
For the comrade he's gladdest to hail.

We would find all the things we intended to do
But forgot, and remembered too late,
Little praises unspoken, little promises broken,
And all of the thousand and one
Little duties neglected that might have perfected
The day for one less fortunate.

It wouldn't be possible not to be kind
In the Land of Beginning Again;
And the ones we misjudged and the ones
whom we grudged
Their moments of victory here
Would find in the grasp of our loving handclasp
More than penitent lips could explain.

For what had been hardest we'd know had been best,
And what had seemed loss would be gain;

For there isn't a sting that will not take wing
When we've faced it and laughed it away;
And I think that the laughter is most what we're after
In the Land of Beginning Again.

So I wished that there were some wonderful place
Called the Land of Beginning Again,
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches
And all of our poor selfish grief
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door,
And never be put on again.

As baptized believers in Jesus Christ we *have* been born again. We have a new life in Christ. We have entered the Land of Beginning Again. In our baptism we have experienced both water and spirit, we have been forgiven of our sins and made new, and now we are prepared to see the kingdom of God, not just in eternity, but here on earth. We are also equipped to do the work of the Kingdom, because of the indwelling spirit within us. We are going to encounter our own Nic's at Night in our journey. Are we prepared to help them learn how to be born again?

Prayer:

Holy Spirit of God, invisible like the wind, we do not see you moving among us, but the effect we see—come to our hearts: that we may be renewed and reborn.

Open our minds: that we may perceive your kingdom.

Lift up our eyes to where the cross of Christ stands for our healing: so may we believe, and in believing not die but have eternal life; through him who in your love for us you sent into the world, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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