

March 12, 2017
Genesis 12:1-4a
John 3:1-21

Who is this in the dark with Nicodemus?

Today is the second Sunday in the season of Lent, and today we find Jesus in the dark. It is night time and Nicodemus, a great Jewish leader, has come to talk with Jesus. It is night time and it is important for us to notice that. Because details like that make for a good story. And our story from the gospel of John begins with Nicodemus, a leader very visible in his community, trying to be invisible with Jesus.

It is night time in our story. And at night time, things are hard to see. In the dark, it's hard to know exactly where and what things are. In the dark there are shadows and shapes of things that might be lurking and probably some spiders. In the dark, things are hidden and they are uncertain. And the world can feel confusing and scary. Maybe you have been in the dark before. Maybe you know what it's like to not see and not understand. To wonder what's going on and why things are the way they are. And why people get hurt. And why your family is struggling. And why your friends don't seem to like you. And why the world seems

to be out to get you. Maybe you feel like things are dark and you are in the dark about why.

Maybe that's why it was night time when Nicodemus went to visit Jesus. Because he was in the dark. And because the darkness was a good place to hide. Because in the dark, no one would see Nicodemus. They wouldn't see him going to meet with Jesus. Because a Pharisee like Nicodemus should NOT be doing that. Not after what Jesus had done at the temple. Not after he had caused chaos in their holy place of worship during the Passover, one of the busiest holidays of the year. Jesus had gone in and chased out the sacrificial animals and tossed the tables of the money changers. And he had shouted that the system was corrupt and this is not how God's house should look. It would be like someone going into Walmart and knocking over all the Easter displays and dumping out the cash registers and shouting about how Easter isn't bunnies and chocolate eggs. Imagine if that happened today. Imagine how angry people would be and how scared they would be of Jesus and how they would probably call the police.

Nicodemus went at night to visit Jesus because he didn't want anyone to see him there. Because Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a good citizen; a great, respected scholar to everyone in his community. And if they saw him with Jesus, they would talk. They would criticize. They would say: "What are you doing, Nicodemus? Why are you hanging out with Jesus? He wrecked our temple! He messed everything up with the animals and the money changers. He's not a good guy, Nicodemus. He's a bad influence, Nicodemus. He's not on God's side, Nicodemus. Why are you with him?"

If Nicodemus had any sense, he wouldn't hang out with Jesus. Maybe you know someone like that, that no one would hang out with. That weird person. That disagreeable person. That person who always smells like sweaty socks. That person who is trouble and if you hang around with them, you'll have trouble too. Nicodemus knew he shouldn't. But he still went at night. In the dark, so no one would see. He went to Jesus because, well, because he had to. Because he needed to. Because Nicodemus was living in the shadows. And there was so much darkness in the world, and so much confusion, but there didn't seem to be any

with Jesus. Something about Jesus illuminated everything. It made Nicodemus see things in a new way. It made him think there was more to the world. And more to life. And it was terrifying. And it was exciting. And Nicodemus wanted to know more, but he wasn't sure. He wasn't quite ready for all this.

So Nicodemus went at night and he said to Jesus, "We know you are a teacher from God. We know that what you do, you couldn't do without God." Notice the details here, because details are what make a good story. Notice Nicodemus says 'We know you are from God' as if all the other Pharisees agree with him. Notice that Nicodemus makes a statement to Jesus, but it's really more of a question, isn't it? Because he wants to know if he IS from God. He wants to know how this light shines in the darkness. And how God can be bigger than any temple and bigger than any religious authority, and bigger than the way things have always been and bigger than what anyone thinks of us and bigger than our fears and our worries and all the darkness out there in the world. Nicodemus wants to understand, but he doesn't yet. He isn't there yet. 'How can these things be?', he asks.

Have you ever asked that question? Have you ever wondered about God and wanted to believe, but you just weren't there yet? That you wanted to have faith, but you just don't know how. That you want to hope in a God who can do amazing things, impossible things; and that God can do those things in YOU, and in others. Do you ever wish you could believe that, but you just don't yet?

If you have, you are not alone. There are many, many others who have been there. The Bible is full of people who struggle to have faith in God. And the church is full of people like that too, people who want to believe, but don't always find it easy. Who question. Who need to think it through. Who need time to process. And according to the Bible, it's OK to be there. It's Ok to be there with Nicodemus. Because that's where Jesus is. He is there with Nicodemus. And he tells him, it's OK. And that when it comes to faith, there are three important things to know. First, that it's like birth. Second, that it must develop and gestate. And third, that faith delivers us into a whole new world where, just like newborn babies, we will have to learn everything again.

First, Jesus says that having faith is like being born. And the thing about being born is that it's not something you do. It's not something you have any control over or that you can make happen yourself. Being born is something that happens TO you. It is a gift. It is a result of the Spirit blowing where it will. It is like your birthday, Jesus says. Surprise!

There you are!

Now, I don't remember the day of my birth. But I'm pretty sure I didn't do much to make it happen. At the time, I didn't think to myself, hey, it's time for me to be born into the world. I didn't start the contractions. I didn't do the pushing. I didn't decide to appear. I am pretty sure I didn't decide anything. And that I cried about going from warm darkness out into the bright chilly world. My birth happened to me. And that's what Jesus says faith is like. Suddenly it happens to us and there we are; believing that God is real.

It's like a baby being born, Jesus says. Faith just happens. And like a baby, it needs to develop and gestate. And that's the second thing about faith; it takes time. Like a baby, growing in its mother. Like Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus at night in the dark. He isn't quite ready for a new

life in the light. He cannot go from being a respected leader in the world as it is, to a newborn in the world as it should be; where the Spirit blows where it will. Nicodemus isn't ready for that. But over time, through the gospel, Nicodemus gestates. He develops. At first, he is hiding in the dark with Jesus. But the next time we see him, he is speaking up for Jesus. He tells his friends, the other Jewish leaders, that they should give Jesus a fair hearing. And then the third time we see Nicodemus, it is right after the biggest moment in the gospel of John. Right after Jesus has been crucified and he has died a terrible and unfair death on the cross. And here comes Nicodemus, in broad daylight, with 100 pounds of embalming spices for Jesus' body. Now Nicodemus' friends had just rejected Jesus. The government had just condemned Jesus as a criminal. The crowds had just scorned him. The soldiers had just mocked him. Jesus had just died, seemingly abandoned by God. But Nicodemus is with Jesus. And he doesn't care who sees him. He doesn't care what it looks like to others. Because Nicodemus finally sees who Jesus is. He sees the light shining in the darkness. And it took the whole story for him to get there. It took time for Nicodemus and it takes time for us. It

takes time to be ready into a new life in God. And we need to allow for growth and development. We need to have patience; and have faith that God has faith in us. That God is at work in us, growing us; all of us are under construction and none of our stories are finished yet.

But this birth of ours, this birthday of faith, it's not easy. When we are born of the Spirit, when we are delivered into a new life with God, a life from above, a life that is bigger and deeper, and out of our hands and into the hands of God, it can be a shock. Going from a dark cozy comfortable, sheltered life into the brightness of life in Christ, we are babies again. That's the third thing Jesus tells us. When we are born of the Spirit, we start all over again. We have to relearn everything and rethink everything again. The word for again that Jesus uses in Greek is 'anōthen' which can mean 'born again' or 'born from above.' And Jesus doesn't mean we are born again like it's some title or church qualification. It means we are starting a whole new life again. We've gone back to the beginning. And we are learning again how to walk and talk and think and have relationships. Not in the world as it is, but as it should be. Not from below but from above. We leave our old life behind

like Abram in our story from Genesis. We leave it behind and starting again with God.

Last Sunday, a group gathered in Midway to hear the story of Amuri Kikoko, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo. He and his family had to run from their home one day without warning when civil war broke out. Part of the family fled with his father. And the other part went with Amuri and his mother. For four years, he didn't see his father and he had no idea if he and the rest of his family were alive. In Namibia, they were reunited at a refugee camp. Then they waited for years and years to come to America. In the camp, there was little space. And the food they got every month was usually not enough to feed their family of 13. When they finally made it to Lexington, all that Amuri had were the clothes he had on. But Amuri said, "I am so lucky. Every day, I see children going to school, and I think how lucky they are. And about how I had to walk miles to get to my school in Congo. How I had to buy my own books and bring my own food. And here, they give you books and food. And how can you not succeed and how can you not have a good life here?" And hearing him talk, I felt like I was delivered into a

new world of gratitude for all that I have and all the people in the world who are hoping that life can be better, that God is bigger and brighter than the darkness out there.

Life is a gift. God's love is a gift. Faith is a gift. We may doubt sometimes. We may wonder. We may feel like we are in the dark. But that's OK. God is with us. And God is at work, getting us ready to start again. So we can learn again to walk in ways that do not harm the earth. And talk in ways that do not harm others. And work in ways that build up our community. And live with gratitude, because all of life is a gift. Thanks be to God.