

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills - from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 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?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

"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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"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.

"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.

Sermon

Last week it was the Tempter that encounter Jesus in the wilderness. This week, it is Nicodemus that encounters Jesus in the night. If any character from the Bible can be regarded as representative of 21st century church members, it might be Nicodemus. In many ways he is a sympathetic character. A successful and self-confident man, he plays a leadership role in his community. He is spiritually open and curious, yet also rational. He approaches Jesus directly and tries to figure out Jesus' actions and social networks. He is committed and curious enough that he makes an appointment to talk with Jesus face to face. However, Nicodemus is not ready to go public with his interest in Jesus, so he makes the appointment in the middle of the night, when he can keep his faith secret, separated from the rest of his life. His imagination is caught by Jesus, but he wants to compartmentalize whatever faith he has. Nicodemus is not yet ready to declare his faith in the light of day, not prepared to let it change his life.

In and of itself, there is much to praise about a faith that thrives in the dark. It is genuine, heartfelt, personal, and often deep. The point is not that his hidden faith is somehow faulty. There is something wonderful about Nicodemus's faith, something that we hope for, for our children and even for ourselves. A faith that seeks, and questions, and wonders. A faith that recognizes Jesus's actions and sees God through them. It is not that his faith is hidden, but the point is that it is too small. In this text Jesus suggest that Nicodemus's kind of faith is incomplete, even immature. He likens his midnight encounter with Nicodemus to a child still safe in its mother's womb. You are still gestating, Jesus implies. You must be born again, and declare this faith in the light of day.

Taking a deeper look at this encounter, we begin to see that this educated, curious leader comes to Jesus with his pondering, "you are a teacher who comes from God", he makes this statement as a hypothesis - "this is what I think you are, confirm or deny". "How can anyone be born that has grown old? Can one enter a second time into the womb? "How can these things be?" Nicodemus comes filled with questions, wanting to understand, wanting to use logic and rational thinking to fully comprehend who Jesus really is.

Remember last week when I talked about choosing Jesus as the historical figure you would invite to dinner? I mentioned that one reason we would want to have Jesus to dinner is because we have our questions to. In fact, many of us have said, "When I get to heaven, the first thing I am going to ask Jesus is... fill in the blank." Our human minds struggle with mystery, it struggles with the spiritual. Partly we struggle because we are wired to be rational, concrete thinkers. But I think we struggle more because we know that knowledge is power.

If Nicodemus can only get his questions answered, if he can simply learn exactly who Jesus is and how Jesus does what he does, then that knowledge would make Nicodemus feel more comfortable at night, sleep easier in the sure knowledge of how God works. "I know how the magic trick works, I understand how and why Jesus is

doing what he is doing.” Knowledge is power, but more than that, knowledge is comfort for Nicodemus, it rests his curiosity and allows him to go on with the life that he is leading.

I don't believe that Nicodemus's faith is necessarily bad or flawed. Not the faith that comes in the night and not the faith that seeks answers. But when Nicodemus encounters Jesus, with his questions and curiosity, his fears and his hopes - when Nicodemus encounters Jesus and hears two of the most powerful sentences ever spoken, ever written down: “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. 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.” When he heard these words, Nicodemus simply kept his faith in the dark. He heard the Good News of Jesus Christ, and he kept it for himself.

What do our questions for Jesus lead to? Knowledge, comfort, personal edification? If that is all, then we are not ready to be changed by our encounter. We are not ready to be changed by Christ's good news. But if we are ready, when we are ready - well, God is ready - even eager - to do the hard, messy, sweating labor that will bring us to maturity and new life.