

Under the Cover of Darkness

John 3:1-17

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I love this story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus under the cover of darkness. Nicodemus, obviously, is interested in having a conversation with Jesus without a crowd. He wants to have a private audience, as it were. And coming at night allows this.

If Nicodemus is a sort of Everyman, we learn something about ourselves by learning something about him. Allow me to make a few observations about Nicodemus.

1.) Some suggest that Nicodemus has come to pick a fight with Jesus.

Is that all the faith is, a chess game of intellectual one-upmanship? If we come to God ready only for debate, are we able to listen and to learn?

2.) Some scholars say that Nicodemus came at night because he represents the powers of darkness. If that's true, it's comforting that Nicodemus could come bringing his real self: the hopeful and faithful aspects of himself, but also his sin and brokenness.

So can we.

3.) Some scholars suggest that Nicodemus comes at night to represent a man who was lost in the dark but came to Jesus seeking light.

This story suggests that if we are lost, we will find our true north is the face of Jesus. I think that's what happened to Nicodemus on that night: the slow fires of faith were lit in his heart.

4.) Some scholars suggest that Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night because Nicodemus was afraid of what others might think.

This text reminds us that we, too, can come to Jesus in the cover of night. Nobody else has to know.

5.) Nicodemus may have come to Jesus to offer advice. Nicodemus, after all, is a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin, which is the supreme council of Jewish leaders and the highest court of justice at Jerusalem in NT times. There are 71 members, comprised of religious leaders and members of wealthy families.

Nicodemus may think he has authority over Jesus. Nicodemus may think that Jesus is a lesser person than he. Nicodemus may have thought Jesus needed his advice.

Many folks want to serve God, but only as advisers. Nicodemus learns very quickly that Jesus doesn't need an advisor.

6.) Nicodemus is a teacher. But notice that he comes to learn. He brings his curious, listening spirit. This, I suspect, is the best way to approach the divine: with wonder, and awe, with questions, and with curious

anticipation. If I think I already know everything, we're less likely ever to learn anything new. And we're less likely ever to be surprised by grace.

7.) Many believe Nicodemus is trying to make up his mind about Jesus. He's just not sure. Aren't we glad Nicodemus could come even though he wasn't sure?

8.) Notice that Nicodemus and Jesus are talking on two different levels, and Nicodemus is confused. Jesus says no one can see the kingdom of God unless she is born "from above" (or, "again"). Nicodemus—thinking on a literal level—is incredulous; "how can anyone be born after she is old?"

It appears in reading all of John's gospel, that Nicodemus grew in his understanding and appreciation of Jesus. But on his first meeting, much of what Jesus said to Nicodemus just didn't make sense.

9.) In the middle of John's gospel, Nicodemus argued publicly with the Sanhedrin against arresting Jesus (7:50-51). At this point in John's gospel, we know that Nicodemus is willing to stick out his neck for Jesus. Nicodemus risks his own power (and life?) by standing up for Jesus.

There may come a time when being in relationship with Jesus may require risk on our part. When Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the cover of darkness, he, perhaps, is willing only to risk little. But later, he's willing to go an extra mile or two.

Perhaps that is—or will be—the case with us.

10.) At the end of John's gospel, after Jesus dies on the cross, it is Nicodemus who comes to get the body of Jesus for burial. Nicodemus brought the spices—a large amount—to prepare the body of Jesus for burial (19:39). Nicodemus and Joseph and Arimathea prepare the body and bury it. Some say that Nicodemus, at this point in his relationship with Jesus, understands the kingship of Jesus, that's why the burial is fitting for a king with all the spices.

This begs the question: What gifts do we bring to God? Is our bag filled with an abundance of the best spices? Is our gift fit for a king?

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John Calvin believed that Nicodemus is a secret disciple. Soren Kierkegaard believed that Nicodemus, in this first appearance in the gospel, was an admirer of Jesus but not yet a follower. Many scholars agree Nicodemus is a complex figure, a "work in progress, on his way from being intrigued by Jesus to believing in Jesus" (p. 46 *Feasting on the Word*).

That's what I like think about Nicodemus—and maybe even myself, for that matter.

Like Nicodemus, perhaps we, too, are a work in progress. Growing bolder in and more curious about the faith.

Certainly the perfecter of our faith is always willing to meet us in the light of day, under the cover of darkness, and at this table.

May God give us the courage and curiosity to show up.

AMEN.