

Nicodemus

JOHN 3:1-17

Third Sunday of Lent, 15 March 2020
From the front pew of First Presbyterian Church,
Champaign, Illinois
Matt Matthews

When you approach God, how do you do it? Loudly, proudly, with lots of fan fare? Humbly, quietly, reverently? With questions, with faith, with doubt, with anger, with all of those things depending on your mood?

How do you approach God?

Here in the third chapter of John we find Nicodemus approaching Jesus. He shows up in three episodes in John's gospel: here at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. Allow me to present several possible interpretations to his nighttime visit with Jesus. As I do this, think about how YOU approach God in Jesus Christ.

To make up for my last sermon, which was pointless, this sermon has a whopping 11 points. (That's a joke...) I really have 11 points:

1.) Some suggest that Nicodemus has come to pick a fight with Jesus. "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." Is Nicodemus just buttering Jesus up? As Pharisees and other leaders will do to Jesus at other times, it is possible that Nicodemus has come to trip Jesus up, to trick him, to find a flaw in Jesus's line of thinking, to argue with him.

Is that how you approach Jesus? Ready for a fight?

Remember, that's how Job approaches God finally near the end of that great Old Testament book. Job is mad at God, and Job lets God know about it.^[1] That's not a bad thing at all; is that how you come, ready for a fight, ready to argue?

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

Is that how you approach Jesus: for clarity, for understanding. *I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see.* Do we come to Jesus hoping to get a glance at what is holy, right, and good?

The Psalmist understood the darkness of the world. But the Psalmist also understood ever so clearly the source of light (Psalm. 139):

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"

even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

Is that why Nicodemus came? Was he seeking a light in darkness? Is that why we come to Jesus?
Are we seeking God's light?

3.) Some scholars suggest that Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night because he was afraid of being seen with Jesus. Nicodemus was afraid of what his Jewish friends and the Jewish authorities might say or do to him for being curious.

Is that how we come? Secretly, so as not to be seen by others? Are we embarrassed by what others might say? In some cultures, if your boss finds out you're a Christian you could lose your job—or worse. Was Nicodemus ashamed? Did he have a lot to lose? Was he afraid of getting caught? Did he simply want to visit Jesus privately, anonymously?

Are we ashamed? Are we afraid? Do we have something to hide?

4.) John Calvin believed that Nicodemus is a secret disciple.

Is that who we are? Secret disciples? We don't want others to know that we strive to be disciples? Do we keep our faith on the QT, on the down low? Is our faith a secret?

5.) Soren Kierkegaard believed that Nicodemus was an admirer of Jesus as opposed to a follower. And there's a difference. (Eric Corbin preached a very good sermon about this very point recently.) Some say that Nicodemus is a *partial sympathizer* (Oxford Dictionary).

Does that describe you? *Yeah, I sort of like what Jesus stands for, but I'm not ready to be fully engaged. I'm a social Christian (kind of like a social drinker.) I'm really not into my faith too deeply. I'm not a fanatic. I believe some of it, but not all of it; and if I can't believe it all, I think it best for me to keep my distance.*

6.) Nicodemus 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 is part of the one-percent, the power elite. Does Nicodemus think he's doing Jesus a favor by chatting it up with him.

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

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

In our relationship with Jesus, are we willing to risk?

8.) At the end of John's gospel, after Jesus dies on the cross, Nicodemus comes to get the body of Jesus for burial. Nicodemus brought the spices—100-pounds—to prepare the body of Jesus (19:39). Nicodemus and Joseph and Arimathea prepare the body and bury it in an empty tomb. Some say Nicodemus misses the point and he's just doing a nice thing for a friend. Others say Nicodemus understands the kingship of Jesus, that's why the burial is fitting for a king with all the spices.

Do we come to Jesus with our best gifts? Do we bring to Jesus our treasure?

9.) Nicodemus is a teacher. He comes to learn. He's curious. "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."

Is that how we come, ready to sit at the feet of the master? Or, is there nothing left for us to learn? Are we uninterested in intellectual growth? Does the History Channel teach us everything we need to know?

10.) Many believe that Nicodemus is one who is trying to make up his mind about Jesus. He's just not sure. "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."

Is that how you come? With questions? You're not sure, so you show up to go deeper.

11.) Notice that Nicodemus and Jesus are talking on two different levels. Nic is speaking in literal, plain language; Jesus is using symbolic and spiritual language. Nicodemus is confused, not enlightened. Jesus says no one can see the kingdom of God unless s/he is born "from above" (or, "again"). Nicodemus—thinking on a literal level—is incredulous; "how can anyone be born after his is old?"

Is that how you find Jesus? He's speaking on another level? He's not assessable? He's too deep?

* * *

How do we come to Jesus?

Do we come for healing?

"Precious Lord, take my hand
lead me on, help me stand
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn . . ."

Do we come seeking guidance?

"Savior like a shepherd lead us
much we need your tender care . . ."

Do we come with Joy?

“O Sons and daughters, let us sing
with heavenly host to Christ our King . . . “

How do we come to Jesus?

* * *

One scholar suggests that 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. *A work in progress. Growing bolder in the faith.*

Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of darkness . . . Of all the things we learn from Nicodemus, perhaps the greatest is this: Come to Jesus. Come as you are. However we come is fine. The point is to show up. Early or late, in broad daylight or in the shadows of night.

Like Nicodemus, we will find a welcome. We will find intellectual and spiritual challenge. And we will find that not only are we are we deeply loved—so is the whole world. And, of course, in the midst of darkness, we’ll find the light of God’s love.

So, come.

AMEN.

Prayer: Holy God, I am grateful that when we are slow to come, you are patient. And when we finally arrive—early or late—you are there. Guide us as you did Nicodemus on that holy night long ago, for the sake of your son, AMEN.

JOHN 3:1-17

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus 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?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The 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.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹“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. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,^[i] ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“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.

¹⁷“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.”

[i] (There’s an obscure story in Numbers 21:4, where the wandering people of Israel complain against God and Moses. God punishes them with an infestation of poisonous snakes. The people repent. God instructs Moses to make a poisonous snake and put it on a staff. Moses makes a bronze snake, lifts it up on a staff. When people look up at it, they are healed from their wounds.)