

Psalm 121

John 3:1-17

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

March 5, 2023

## Dark to Life

Just a raise of hands to begin: Who remembered that the most famous verse in all the Bible was part of this strange little story about Nicodemus? In the United States, we see it all the time “John 3:16”. It’s printed on posters at games, on billboards, on signs at random places. I once saw it printed on the bottom of a soda cup at a fast-food restaurant. It’s the verse that you probably memorized growing up in Sunday School and it feels like a good summary of what our faith means. So isn’t it interesting that it’s couched as part of this story? Jesus’ famous words here do not occur in a vacuum. There is a story, a reason that he spoke these words and they were meant for this man, Nicodemus, to hear. So rather than begin with John 3:16, let’s begin with Nicodemus.

Right away we learn that he is a Pharisee, a prominent man and a leader in Jerusalem and thus in the nation. He is a scholar and religious teacher, well-educated. He knows a lot. He comes to Jesus by night, covered in the darkness. This little detail in the passage, coming to Jesus by night, intrigues me and I believe tells us a few things.

Coming by night indicates that his intention is not malicious one. Why? Because if his intention were to trap Jesus, to call him out as a fool or a fake, he would do that in the daytime when others could see, witness, and hear and then share widely. But alongside that, coming by night tells us that he wants something from Jesus, to learn something about him but he does not want anyone to know that he is seeking or looking for answers from this man. It’s as if HE does not want to look like a fool. He comes at night when none of his colleagues are likely to be out and about. He’s covered and protected by the darkness, for whatever it is he wants to hide about this encounter that he so desperately seeks. Maybe he comes by night because he does not want others to see he is struggling – struggling to understand what he sees in this man Jesus and/or struggling by what he does not understand.

As we ponder this, can we take a minute and admit that a lot of our own questions, wonderings and aimless mind wandering happens at night? Anyone else? Usually while I’m lying in the dark, thinking through the day or if

something is on my mind, it's at night when my mind goes through so many scenarios and questions. It's at night when I am kept up by unanswered questions and wonderings I have. Anyone else too? It could have been as simple as that for Nicodemus to come to Jesus by night. But we cannot escape his religious leader status and the well polished words and greeting he states as he comes to Jesus at that nighttime encounter. He was clearly prepared to do this.

And so he comes enveloped in the dark and asks his questions, admitting that Jesus has made some kind of impact on him and yet seeking to know more. Nicodemus begins with a polite greeting, "Rabbi, teacher, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. No one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." That's some big praise he is coming in with. He has seen the holy, he has seen power, he has seen hope. He yearns for more. And that yearning comes across to Jesus.

But Jesus answers with statements that befuddle Nicodemus even more. "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." I think it's worth noting here that in the Greek, the word that's translated "from above" is the Greek word "anothen". This word in Greek actually has a double meaning but when it's translated for us into English, it unfortunately kind of flattens it out, but the gospel of John meant it to be heard in this duality. So this word another can be translated both as "again" or "from above." No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again; no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. When our English translations of scripture resolve the tension in Jesus' words for us, the challenge to Nicodemus (and to us as the reader) can be slightly lost. The intent, knowing both of these translations, is that both meanings are true and each interprets the other.

Besides this double meaning in the one word that Jesus speaks, scholar Laura Mendenhall says that Nicodemus comes to Jesus looking for the accounting answer. He is looking for the answer that will make it all add up in a tidy balance sheet and Jesus answers with mystery. You've got to be born from above, Nicodemus. You've got to be born again. You've got to be born of the spirit.

Jesus does not throw him a softball. Right away, he invites Nicodemus to go deeper: Let's not waste our time in the shallow waters of polite faith; come with me into the deep end; let's see if you will sink or swim!

It might seem like Nicodemus sank. The last thing Nicodemus says in our passage is "How can these things be?"

Friends, the overarching imagery of this passage and mystery that Jesus offers is where I invite us to dwell today. New life begins in the dark, in the mystery, in the questions we cannot understand and the answers we cannot always understand right away.

In her book *My Grandfather's Blessings*, Rachel Naomi Remen says, "We have not been raised to cultivate Mystery. We may even see the unknown as an insult to our competence, a personal failing. Seen this way, the unknown becomes a challenge to action. But Mystery does not require action; Mystery requires our attention. Mystery requires that we listen and become open. When we meet with the unknown in this way, we can be touched by a wisdom that can transform our lives."

On this second Sunday of Lent, as we have set out on the wilderness journey, I think it's a good time for us to continue seeking, to pay attention to those big, scary questions that lurk just outside of our line of vision. This week, we are in the company of a seeker who may not really have known what he was looking for. Next week we will meet a woman who did not even know she was seeking until she was found. In both cases, Jesus offers them an amazing opportunity: to see into the realm and reign of God. He pulls back the curtain on the mystery that lies at the heart of creation. God loves. God loves the world.

Because even as Jesus leaves Nicodemus befuddled and in the dark, that famous John 3:16 verse we know so well, it comes as a reminder that God has not abandoned us or left us alone, even in the darkness, even in the mystery, even in the midst of all that is unknown in our lives.

Perhaps, like Nicodemus, we don't entirely understand what's all involved with being born from above or born again. But we understand love. These verses tell us so much about the heart of God. The word for "world" ("*kosmos*" in the Greek) everywhere else in the *Gospel of John* describes something that has complete hostility towards God. Everywhere else in this

gospel, the word *kosmos* is something that works against God. This gives John 3:16 a bit more power: “For God so loved the *God-hating world* that God sent God’s only Son ...” That’s the greatness of God’s love.

And so today, if you are residing in the darkness of all that is unknown, if you have gone to God with questions and now have more questions than answers, can you still trust the transformation that happens in the darkness? In mystery? In all that is unknown in your life and in this world? Because I don’t know everything every single person in this room is going through. I don’t know if you’re residing in dark places or if you’re basking in new life already. Maybe you are just plain tired of the murky places in your life. But the spirit blows where it chooses and even though that does not give us clarity or clear cut answers, there is still hope that lies there.

Sikh activist and lawyer Valerie Kaur gave an address with interfaith leaders on New Years Eve in 2016. In that powerful speech about her ancestors and their struggles in this country, she delivered hope in darkness and the promise of new life that can be birthed from that dark place. She said: “So, the mother in me asks what if? What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if our America is not dead but a country that is waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor? What if all of our grandfathers and grandmothers are standing behind now, those who survived occupation and genocide, slavery and Jim Crow, detentions and political assault? What if they are whispering in our ears “You are brave”? What if this is our nation’s greatest transition?”

She continued: “What does the midwife tell us to do? Breathe. And then? Push. Because if we don’t push we will die. If we don’t push our nation will die. Tonight we will breathe. Tomorrow we will labor in love through love and your revolutionary love is the magic we will show our children.”

For God so loved the world. New life can come through the darkness. Nicodemus will reappear two more times after this in the gospel of John. Once, to defend Jesus among other leaders who want him dead, and one more time to tend Jesus’ body after his death. He will end up anointing his body in myrrh and aloe, wrap him in linens and lay him in the tomb. And we know that even in the darkness of that tomb, new life will come. It may not feel like dark to light, but it will be dark to life.

And so this day and in the week ahead, when we find ourselves in dark places, when we are befuddled by our God and given answers that we do not understand, may we remember that we are not alone. That God did not and will not abandon us there. For God so loved the world that God gave God's only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. We believe. Help our unbelief. Amen.