

In the Darkness with Nicodemus

John 3:1-8

I do not like being left out in the dark, confused, and unable to understand something. I like to feel confident and competent, rather than looking foolish and slow of mind. For that reason, I generally like to stay with what I know and avoid things I know little about. I would think it great if I could speak another language fluently, but I am not sure I can stand the embarrassment of making a fool of myself and butchering another person's language. I cannot imagine a foreigner being patient and forgiving enough to put up with my mispronouncing their language and maybe substituting a word that is horribly wrong unless they want a good laugh at my expense.

However, life is not always like that. Sometimes we must venture into things we know little to nothing about. This happened to me a few weeks ago when I changed internet providers. I dumped Comcast and signed on with AT&T's fiber cable network that recently became available in my neighborhood. I was so pleased with the new high speeds of downloading and uploading. A year of lower monthly fees for internet service helped seal the deal. But so did having a polite, knowledgeable expert come to set up the equipment. He saved me from being overwhelmed and saying words under my breath I ought not to say. He also rescued me from feelings of incompetence and helplessness.

All was great until after the left and I realize I had to reset the internet password in the family printer. It's a compact black and white inkjet with no display window. Everything is done on the computer through the "miracle" of the internet and downloadable apps.

That is where the problems began. I don't know what a WAP button is or what to do if it's missing. Nor do I know the meaning of all those other computer geek abbreviations that are in the instruction manual. When plan A failed, I went to plan B, and when plan B failed, I gave up and I tried to call HP. But where do you find the phone number for service? They hide that number! About two weeks later, I gave it another try, finally finding the number by googling it, and getting a human being on the phone. He asked, "Do you mind if I take over your computer and get this done?" I say, "Please, be my guest," and all is well.

Maybe some of you can relate to this experience, which is a good thing because it will give you empathy for Nicodemus, who we find in our scripture quite confused and frustrated. John tells us that Nicodemus comes to meet with Jesus in the night - which should be heard both as a reference to the time he comes, but more importantly, it tells us that Nicodemus is a man who dwells in the cover of darkness. He is a high-powered man with status, and being associated with Jesus may not be a good career move.

Some interpreters of our scripture want to make fun of Nicodemus as rather bumbling and stupid. But I think that completely misses the point. He's a very bright man, steeped in religious law and scriptures. He's the expert's expert. It is just that in Jesus he has found his match. The conversation between these two rabbis quickly leads to confusion and misunderstanding by Nicodemus. From Nicodemus' vantage point, Jesus is not making much sense.

- "I must be born again?" "How can a person get back in their mother's womb?"
- "You cannot enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." "Born of what? Jesus, you're so confusing."
- "The wind blows where it will. You do not know where it goes or where it's coming from." "Jesus, I don't know where You are coming from."
- "No one has ever gone up to heaven except the Son of Man, who came down from heaven." "Why do you make this so difficult to understand?"

The whole conversation must have been confusing and humiliating for Nicodemus, who is used to being the brightest light in the room. He leaves with more questions than answers. Here is a man who dared to put one foot in the light of Jesus' truth when others in his position were not even giving Jesus the slightest credibility, but wanting to destroy Him. Why does Jesus seem to be making it so difficult for him?

You will not be surprised to know that I find myself sympathetic with Nicodemus. I also find myself at a loss when I hear those same statements of Jesus. He could speak a foreign language and I might understand Him better. Jesus speaks with words in which I have few references to translate them into my own experience. I'll take the Jesus I find in the other gospels with His proverbial teachings and even many of his parables that, with some effort, I can get a handle on.

After struggling with how to make sense of all of this, I had a thought that made sense to me. There are times where we need to be at a loss when confusion can be our best friend. Being in the dark can lead us into the light. I know this was true for so many of the people who came to me for support when I worked as a counselor. Those who could live with the questions, confusion, who did not have quick and easy answers, are the people I often found I supported the best. Those who came to me hanging on to the ways they always thought about themselves, others, their lives, who did not want change and needed to be in control, were the ones I felt I could least serve. They soon decided not to come back.

I realized that Jesus does not want to give Nicodemus what he wants. Jesus wants to give him what he needs. Jesus knew that Nicodemus needed, for once in his life, not to have it all figured out, that he would only make progress as he went through the disorientation of not understanding. If Nicodemus was to stand in the light of the truth and the grace that he was offering, Nicodemus was going to have to let go of many of the assumptions and dogmas that he was so firmly holding onto for dear life. He needed to gather his courage and be willing to risk his status and power so that he might inherit a more transformative, life-enhancing gift.

This is not the first time we have seen Jesus do this. Jesus often gives us the opposite of what we think we need. That rich young ruler who came to Jesus seeking the way to eternal life comes to mind. He wanted Jesus to affirm him for all the hard work he had done to be a good and holy person, and tell him the next assignment that might give him the final assurance that he was on the path to heaven. But Jesus tripped him up by telling him to sell all he had and give it to the poor, and then come follow Him. But Jesus seems to do the same with us in our own time. You'd like to find a way to justify nursing that grudge with someone and Jesus tells you to forgive. You come to worship, wanting a little peace and comfort in your life, and what you receive is a command to go be in relationship and service to those who are poor. You would like to figure God out, get all the answers, have someone hand you the four spiritual laws that get you to heaven, and Jesus goes weird on you with talk that makes no sense.

Jesus wanted Nicodemus to understand that He was not offering Nicodemus some nice new insight into his life, but fundamental transformation and a complete reorientation of his life. Jesus was not into making "life adjustments" but "life transformations." Nicodemus needed to start over and come into this world with a radically new way of seeing himself and this world. He needed to press the factory reset button on himself and begin anew. He had done the advanced training to living a holy life but needed now to go back to the beginning and remember the basics.

That is why Jesus uses such a surprising image. Jesus says we must be born again. The words actually have a double meaning; To be "born again" or to be "born from above." Jesus means the second. We must be reborn in a birth that comes from the womb of God. What a perfect image Jesus offers us. Just for a moment, consider that image of rebirth. A baby begins in a womb. A womb is a place of darkness. In the womb, we are attached to our mother, in whom we dwell, and from who, in that dark warm place, everything is provided. In the womb there is no thinking, only feeling and receiving. We are nurtured into life in God's loving, life-giving womb.

Then the baby is born. To be born is to come out of the darkness and into the light. That transition is a terrifying experience. A baby is born and suddenly surrounded by air and light. But the baby is lovingly swaddled and given the warmth of her mother's body and the reassurance of that same voice of her mother that vibrated in the womb. In loving parenting, that baby trusts that whenever she needs anything, her mother and her partner are present to provide. In deep and non-verbal ways, feelings of love and trust, and devotion are internalized. She believes that this world is fundamentally good and that she is fundamentally good. There is no need to figure things out. There is only a need to receive and to be blessed. The world is full of love and grace.

Now, here is the deal. When we have the core sense of trust and goodwill, we are free to live fully. We have a core of love that will dispel whatever fear threatens to overtake us and control us. We do not need to prove ourselves or justify ourselves. We have an abiding sense of abundance and thanksgiving. That abundance and thanksgiving empower us to be generous and sacrificial people. We can love each other because we are in close connection to the source of all goodness and love. This is the

brilliance of the image of rebirth from the womb of God. We become the children of God, remade and resourced with the love that God has for us.

I think it interesting that those of us who have trouble thinking of God as female might read these verses and have trouble thinking of God as male. If you ever found yourself annoyed with people using feminine images of God, this may be the most important scripture to help you understand that we experience God in both feminine images and masculine images. But, from the very start, it is the power of the feminine energy that shapes us so fundamentally.

Years ago, a pastor was baptizing an infant. It was not going well. The baby was in the middle of a full-blown, out-of-control crying spell, one that pierced the ears of the congregation. He rushed through the ritual. He said the words as reverently as he could manage while holding onto the child as lovingly as possible. He put on the waters of baptism: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" and added, "Whether you like it or not!"

I do not know if that pastor gave a thought to the profound proclamation he made, "Whether you like it or not!" It is not about us - it is about God. God's love is not something we choose, it is only something we accept. It's a given; It's a gift, freely given, independent of our acceptance or rejection. As I said last week, the light of Christ is truth. But, today, we hear clearly that it is grace as well.

It's like the mother who was attempting to put her angry five-year-old to sleep, who did not want to go to bed. The little girl got so angry she started to shout, "I hate you! I hate you!" Her mother said, "I am sorry you feel that way, Lisa, but I love you." "Don't say that!" She shouted back, "Don't say you love me!" And the mother said, "Lisa, it is not up to you. I love you no matter what."

We hear from Nicodemus only two more times. The first time is when he attempts to defend Jesus to those leaders who want Him dead. Then, the last time we see Nicodemus, he and a man named Joseph are carrying the body of Jesus and they wrap him in a shroud and lovingly laid him in a tomb. We are told that Nicodemus brought seventy-five pounds of enormously expensive spices for the burial. Now here is the thing: He only needed two pounds for the burial but he brought 75 pounds. Why so excessive and so extravagant? Because that is how much love Nicodemus has for his master and friend.