

January 28, 2018
We Can't Follow Jesus in the Dark
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John 3:1-28 (NRSV)

[Nicodemus Visits Jesus]

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² 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." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴ 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?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸ 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." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus 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. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that 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. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

²² After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. ²³ John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized ²⁴—John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison.

²⁵ Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. ²⁶ They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the

Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 27 John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. 28 You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.'

Before moving into the passage proper, I want to review what we've learned of biblical justice in the last two weeks:

- Biblical Justice is overwhelmingly generous toward the poor;
- Biblical Justice is driven by the gospel of the Risen Christ Today;
- Biblical Justice gives us cause for hope.

A Pharisee and Jewish leader named Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. There's a whole lot to preach right there. Pharisee Jewish leaders are the folks who, a few chapters from now, are going to be plotting to kill Jesus. And it's night time. Night is the opposite of day, the opposite of light. Darkness and light are persistent themes in John: dark is the arena of evil; Jesus is the light.

Why does this potential enemy of Jesus want a late-night appointment, and why does Jesus give it to him? Nicodemus might be a spy for the Temple, except it's kind of early for that; he might be trying to recruit Jesus for their side; or maybe, Nicodemus himself is going rogue. His introduction is suggestive of all three: *"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, interestingly, treats the statement like ordinary rabbi-talk – rhetoric, like professors on a dais pontificating back and forth, using their words strategically to score against each other. When Nicodemus wants to know if “born again” is what Jesus really means to say, he is asking about the words – not whether a child could actually re-enter a womb. They go back and forth a bit until Jesus drops the rhetoric. Suddenly his words are personal, very personal.

How can you profess to be a man of God and not know what I am talking about? Why, do you suppose, Nicodemus doesn't answer? I think it's because he did know. He knew, and Jesus knew he knew; he just isn't ready to know what he already knows in the way he must know it to take the next step before him: the step toward or away from faith in Christ. Because one cannot follow Jesus in the dark, can he? Jesus is the light. Nicodemus is not ready to know what he knows: that to follow Him means to follow Him. He is the Light.

We also know that Nicodemus already knows what Jesus is talking about, when he says, *"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."* He speaks the straight-up truth of Jesus the Messiah. Out loud and plain as day, Nicodemus tells Jesus, *I see the spirit of God at work in the words and deeds You say and do.*

Have you ever known some truth that you knew only in the dark, that you did not share with anyone else? -- something that you knew inside you and wished like anything you could not have to know it in the daylight too, because of how it was going to mess up your life and the lives of people around you? Ask any Baptist kid who ever knew he or she was gay.

Here are some of my truths: As a little girl, I would rather read than play or talk to other people in my house. As a young woman, I came to think I'm supposed to be a preacher. Most recently, I've come to know that white privilege is a thing; that if everything else was still equal, just being white makes life in this world easier for me than for my neighbors who are brown and black. It's like cruise control on my car. I have the choice to take advantage of it -- or not.

Discipleship is a journey, friends -- full of confession and repentance -- that begins with knowing what we did not know before and continues with deciding what we shall do with what we know. The particular truth Jesus accuses Nicodemus of not knowing has to do with flesh and spirit, ways of knowing and living long discussed by philosophers and cognitive scientists. None of which I am, of course.

I am a preacher. Preachers tell stories. I've told you this story before. A little girl's grandma died when she was six years old. One windy day a few weeks later the front porch swing was banging hard against the house. The mother went to check the noise and the little girl looked up from her coloring and said, *"Oh, that's just Mamaw on the swing. She sits there sometimes."* *"Is that right?"* the mother asked. *"Do you see her other times too?"* *"Oh sure,"* the little girl said, matter-of-factly. *"If you put your hands close together she'll come put her hand in between, like this."* And she went back to coloring.

The poets and the mystics speak of flesh and spirit too, more like the five-year-old we all once were, before modern, Western Protestantism and public school hammered the notion into us that *truth*, that what is *real*, is formed of that which we can see and hear and smell and taste and touch (beginning, coincidentally, at about age six). And that's true; it's just not ALL that's true.

We are not just flesh and bone, but spirit too. And we forget it at our peril, because biblical justice **always** accounts for the spiritual, for the reality that God is at work, always at work in our lives, our life together and the world around us, as much at play in the course of things as any force that human beings bring to bear. In any given situation of injustice, no matter how dim the prospect for change or healing or correction or vindication, there is also and always grounds for hope.

Nicodemus is biblical evidence for that hope. He disappears from the passage after verse 10. How does Nicodemus think he came to know what he knows about Jesus? NO other Pharisee told him (though he does say “we,” interestingly). Might the spirit of God’s own self have led Nicodemus to know this? I would dare to guess, yes. So, he knows here in chapter 3. What he does with what he knows, we know from chapters 7 and 19.

In chapter seven Jesus was back in Jerusalem teaching in the Temple, causing all kinds of trouble for the things he was saying. Jews send police to arrest him. They are too afraid to do so. The other Pharisees are outraged, and Nicodemus speaks up, *“Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?”* To which they respond, *“Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.”* See how they instantly throw him in with Jesus?

It's easy to miss Nicodemus being brave right there. But he was – getting himself identified with the radical. Even when we stammer and can't say all we wish we could, speaking truth to power is still speaking truth to power. With just that sentence – quoting their Bible back to them, mind you – Nicodemus took a big step away from his own institutional religion, when it was acting out of fear of Rome/this world rather than faith in God.

In chapter 19, after all of Jesus' real disciples had abandoned him, leaving his dead, broken, bleeding body to the care of strangers, Nicodemus stepped up. He was half of all the people with the courage to associate themselves with the crucified Christ. Think of all you know about Jewish rules against touching the dead; layer on the shame associated with the cross and the fear of the Romans thinking you are one of Jesus' followers. No one to this point has more closely, more personally associated himself or herself with Jesus than Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. Not even Peter, James and John were willing to do this for their friend.

I like this Nicodemus character. He starts out thoughtful, intentional; the way I wish I was, instead of so jumpy and impulsive. He's significantly more cautious about discipleship and faith than the way I was raised to think was right, where one could reasonably be expected to move from disbelief to full-blown faith in the time it takes to sing a four-verse hymn. I like him for showing me here on a Bible page that the transition from knowing the truth to living the truth is more complicated than simply wanting to. Nicodemus was a human being, with people to please and fears to overcome. And Jesus gave him space for that – more space than Nicodemus' own community was willing to give him.

I like thinking Jesus let Nicodemus make a late-night appointment, knowing full well why: because it is a huge decision to follow Christ – a dangerous, risky, life-transforming decision, in which a person can lose friends, lose status, lose a job, lose the life she had

before she followed Him. Because some things cannot be kept, if Jesus is going to be received.

However timid Nicodemus seems here in chapter 3, he more than came around. He lapped those Sons of Thunder when it came to courage – not that it's a contest, I know. But it's cause for hope for all of us, amen? We who already know there's more going on than what we see with these eyes and hear with these ears, *we* know that the pursuit of biblical justice in the world today is up to us – but not to us alone. The spirit of God which moves the wind and gives us breath is also here – within, among, and in the world around us – giving us cause for hope and courage. For there is much work to do, and we are called to do it.