

March 8, 2020
DayLight Disciples
Annette Hill Briggs
John 3:1-21

3 Now 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, 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. ¹⁸Those 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. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But 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.”

John 3:16 is the first Bible verse I ever memorized, and I don’t remember not knowing it. I also don’t remember thinking about what it meant – only what Sunday School teachers said it meant: that *if I gave my heart to Jesus I would go to heaven when I died*. I had to grow up and read and pray for my own self to discover that we don’t have to wait 70 or

80 years to cash in that memory verse. Eternal life doesn't begin when we die. It never begins, and it doesn't end. We live in it – like fish live in water.

This time-and-space-bound kingdom full of flesh and bone, so much noise and so many words, so much beauty and so much heartache, where death is both ever-present, sadder than sad, and a channel to that deeper, wider life, is but a pocket of that ocean my first Sunday School teachers called *eternal life*. I also kind of imagined John 3:16 lived on a Bible page all by itself. And here it is tucked inside a story about a man named Nicodemus who visits Jesus at night and turns out to be a living example of the very story Jesus tells him – one of those *born again* followers of Jesus. Or, maybe, a daylight disciple.

Would you pray with me? *When we are tempted to make faith small, O God, to tuck and fit it into the lives we already have, may seekers like Nicodemus draw new vision and courage from us and from our life together. We ache for the courage to abandon our grip on things that do not last, to embrace what cannot be lost. Amen.*

In a world so full of chaos and suffering, why should my life be so calm and comfortable? I wrote that in my journal on Friday morning – and was promptly just appalled at myself. Because the answer is so profane and trite. My life is comfortable and calm because I choose for it to be – which got me to thinking about Nicodemus and his choice to go see Jesus at night and how that worked out for him. He also had a pretty easy life, considering his time and place – Roman-occupied Israel. A member of the Sanhedrin – the Jewish ruling council – the group that will eventually petition Pilate to have Jesus put to death, he has status and power, political and religious.

One of John's major themes unfolds in chapter 3: darkness and light. Often as not, he puts them in the same sentence:

- *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.*
- *"I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life."*
- *The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light.*

Stories of faith and obedience and miracles and truth happen in the daylight. Stories of temptation, doubt, ignorance, and unbelief happen in the dark.

And the theme has a sharp edge the church in good faith must address: "*darkness and light*" has embedded itself into our church language and our everyday language as "*blackness and whiteness*." Every time we refer to some moral situation as *a gray area*, what do we mean? We mean it is neither black nor white, neither right nor wrong, bad nor good. Which color is right? Which color is bad?

In movies who wears the white hat? The good guy. What color is the tower that smart people live in? Ivory. What do our hymns have to say on the subject?

*He's the Lily of the Valley, the Bright and Morning Star,
He's the fairest of ten thousand to my soul.*

*Whiter than snow, Lord, wash me just now,
As in Thy presence humbly I bow.*

And the one this morning:

For each perfect gift of thine To our race so freely given,
written in 1864 by an Englishman and sung in white churches who know good and well
he meant the *human* race.

Most hymns are quotes from scripture, and they are accurate metaphors. Snow IS white. But *white* is no more clean than red or green or purple or brown. Purity as whiteness is a Bible theme that was never meant to register as a skin color. White western culture did that hundreds of years ago and left a residue so embedded in our language we mostly don't hear it until it's pointed out to us. But hopefully we want it pointed out since it's hurtful and, most of all, divisive to the body of Christ.

Nicodemus is the one who visited Jesus at night. He is introduced this way three times in the gospel of John, beginning here. Did they know each other already? or does Jesus simply recognize him for who he obviously is – a Jewish ruler; member of the Sanhedrin, the group he knows will eventually drive him to the praetorium? Instead of small talk, they fall instantly into rabbinical debate.

Nicodemus: *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: *Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*

Nicodemus: (taking the bait) *How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?*

Jesus: *I'm not talking about your mother. I am talking about the kingdom of God. Birth there happens by water. And Spirit. Don't pretend you don't know about Spirit. Spirit is what sent you here. Just like the wind, it sends us where we would never go on our own.*

Nicodemus: *How can these things be?*

Jesus: *Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you still pretend not to know?*

The scene continues like a play in which Nicodemus listens along with the audience to Jesus's sermon about the darkness and the Light – the light by which he thought and prayed, apparently, by which he re-read his Bible, by which he watched and listened in

his Temple council meetings. The light is changing how he thinks. We know so because we can hear it in his voice when he shows up again in chapter 7, this time in the daylight.

The crowds have really gone after Jesus. Rumors are spreading about him being the Messiah. Folks are getting noisy and the Sanhedrin is worried about Roman attention, so they send their own soldiers to arrest Jesus. But the soldiers themselves are taken by Jesus's teaching charisma – so they leave him alone, which makes some of the council members even more upset, reminding the soldiers whom they work for, when Nicodemus (who had once gone to Jesus at night) tentatively pipes up to remind his colleagues that *our own law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing*. A reminder they do not appreciate at all and to which they respond by calling Nicodemus a Galilean and suggesting he search and see that no prophet will come from Galilee. A response that proves them both mean and ignorant.

I feel for Nicodemus here, watching him trying to integrate what he likes about Jesus with what he likes about his calm, comfortable life; sprinkling radical faith on top of his solid reputation in a town where reputation matters. Hoping that isn't what Jesus is talking about when he says, *And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light*. Here, and over and over again, John will say that Jesus is the Light. The Light. Jesus has already given me all I need. My choice: to hoard all my trinkets and toys like they are going to save me. Go figure.

In chapter 7, Nicodemus gave it a shot and mostly failed. At least he's doing Jesus's working in the daytime now and still letting the Lord work on him, apparently (see Chapter 19 of John). Turns out there's another member of the Sanhedrin who secretly followed Jesus. Remember his name? Joseph of Arimathea. Neither of them is mentioned throughout Jesus's arrest, trial and execution. Nor when Jewish council leaders go to Pilate to ask that Jesus's legs be broken so he'll be dead and buried – the whole ordeal out of sight before Passover tourists arrive in Jerusalem. John says, in the midst of it Joseph went to Pilate to ask for Jesus's body. Nicodemus buys and brings the burial spices. Together they carry the bloody, filthy soiled body of a condemned criminal – handle it, intimately, in ways no Jews who cared about ritual purity would consider.

Nobody doubted whose side Nicodemus was on now – now that he'd just embraced the body of a dead criminal. Again, friends, not just dead: eviscerated. Blood, urine, feces – human death is really, really messy. However dark it looked and sounded and smelled at the moment, Nicodemus chose to embrace the Light. I can't tell you what was in his head and heart, but Jesus knew. Jesus knew that first night in the middle of the night when Nicodemus first came to see him, when Jesus received him and entertained his questions and pushed back with questions of his own – questions about the Spirit which Nicodemus was trying so hard NOT to listen to. And the other question: "You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things?" Only in the dark he didn't know. Only so long as he stayed in the dark he didn't.

But he didn't stay. The Spirit moved him to the daylight – the same way it will move the rest of Jesus's disciples in this story soon enough. It moved Nicodemus to go where Jesus went. To the praetorium and the cross, to embrace death without a shred of fear. Nicodemus's bid to faith began in the middle of the night and took him to a graveyard where he chose to love the light rather than the darkness. To love the light demanded that he move, that he commit to certain action, to certain allegiances that would sever him from the comforts of life as he'd known it so far.

Still, he embraced the cross, not knowing for sure what came next – only confident in the words of Jesus as he'd heard them once before: *For God so loved that world, that whoever believes in him, is bound for everlasting life.* May his wisdom and his courage bring our own hearts, minds and bodies to such faith.