

Lent 2
March 12, 2017
Nicodemus: Darkness and Exaltation
Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17
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Fellow Ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
Jesus our Savior
And the Holy Spirit, the breath of life.

My parents moved from St. Paul, MN to Spokane, WA and ultimately to Portland in 1946. Many decades later we discovered that mom was a prolific letter writer.

We also discovered that our grandmother and aunties were border-line hoarders. In the spring of 1992 a package arrived from Minnesota bearing the return address of our oldest cousin. In the shoebox lay more than 125 letters in our mother's handwriting each of them bearing the greeting "Dear Folks", preserved for more than four decades by our grandma and two aunties.

These letters tell the story of our family from 1946 to 1953. Eager to read the stories of the family into which I was born last, I spent months reading and organizing these letters, laughing, weeping, amazed by mother's writing skill and stunned by the hardships that our parents endured.

When finished, I prepared six large notebooks containing copies of the letters and gave one to each of my siblings. That was more than 10 years ago. Now and then I ask one or another of my siblings about the letters. Their response is "I lived it, I don't need to read those letters".

Today's gospel is one of those stories that we think we know inside out. We certainly know the best-loved verse in the Bible, John 3:16. Many who are marginally familiar with the Bible know this verse.

However, if we remain content with what we think we know, we miss the depth and richness of God's scandalous and astonishing grace revealed through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus the Christ.

So, let's take a walk with Nicodemus and hear what Jesus has to say to him and to us in this very familiar gospel story. Nicodemus, a Pharisee comes to Jesus at night, addresses Jesus as "Rabbi", confesses that he is among the people who know Jesus as a teacher come from God. He recognizes the presence of God in Jesus' signs and wonders. Nicodemus is a faithful Pharisee, a keeper of the laws handed down from Moses in oral and written form.

In just two verses the Fourth Evangelist exposes Nicodemus's dimly illuminated understanding of who, and WHAT he has encountered. Nicodemus attests to what he has seen Jesus do and professes Jesus to be teacher FROM God. He comes to Jesus with a set of convictions about what is real, what is possible.

This initially strikes us as promising. However, it is what Nicodemus KNOWS that becomes a stumbling block, a darkness to which he clings, and this knowledge obscures his ability to hear and receive the testimony of the one speaking to him.

Based entirely on his personal observation Nicodemus stops short of confessing Jesus to BE God. He can only see that Jesus is FROM God.

Jesus exposes Nicodemus to the possibility of a deeper understanding of God's divine faithfulness and the shocking reality of God's love. Nicodemus, however is not ready to take that leap.

Instead, Nicodemus is reduced to incredulous outbursts of confusion and astonishment, three times questioning Jesus:

"How can anyone be born after having grown old? (4a)

"Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" (4b)

"How can these things be?" (9)

He remains scandalized by what Jesus is saying, clinging to the literal meaning of the Greek word *ανωθεν*, to be born again, unable to comprehend its spiritual meaning to be born from above.

As Nicodemus fades from the scene at verse 11, the pronoun "you" shifts from the singular to the plural. Jesus' rebuke is for all generations, including us. Abundant and eternal life are gifts from God, from above.

When we think of eternal life, we think of that place we will go after death.

No, Jesus promises abundant and eternal life right here, right now.

Not because of any achievement or claim or proof of ours.

Not because of the special prayers or fasting we take on.

But because of God's shocking action on our behalf.

Jesus' death on the cross not only defeats the power of darkness, it is the moment of God's glorious triumph over darkness. And that brings us to this most beloved verse: 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. The enormity of God's grace is fully revealed in verse 17 God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world! Condemnation is already realized.

The very laws that Nicodemus strives so faithfully to preserve are the condemnation of the world. It is the laws of Moses and our inability to keep them that reveals our desperate need for God's grace.

And God, out of compassion and love sends his Son, Jesus the Christ NOT to judge who is worthy of eternal life but to be lifted up EXALTED on the cross, glorified in resurrection and to return to the Father in triumph.

What kind of Nicodemus thinking do we cling to: Nicodemus comes to Jesus hidden in darkness. He misunderstands Jesus because he takes his words literally and is therefore confused about what Jesus says. He disappears from the story having shown no signs of greater comprehension or faith.

He will reappear at two later points in the fourth gospel narrative. Late in chapter 7 he offers a somewhat hesitant defense of Jesus when the temple authorities redouble their intent to arrest Jesus. And, finally in chapter 20 he accompanies Joseph of Arimathea, with an exorbitant amount of spices for Jesus' burial. Does Nicodemus come out of the darkness and into the light only after witnessing Jesus' exaltation on the cross?

Jesus invites us . . . we who might have difficulty believing that the cross is the moment of God's victory to come along for the walk . . . to "come and see." Jesus invites us to look at the cross in a new way. Not as symbol of defeat and darkness, but as the very heart of God's love.

My siblings think they know the family story, and they do, from their own perspective. Nicodemus thinks he knows who Jesus is, and he does, from what he has personally observed. Jesus invites us to change our perspective. Jesus invites us to "come and see" what God has done. Jesus invites us to "taste and see" at this banquet table. Jesus invites us to come out of the darkness of doubt and fear into the glorious light of God's enduring presence. Jesus invites us to gaze upon the scandalous cross of glory on which God's enormous love for the world is raised up for all to see.

Thanks be to God.