

Through the Dark

First in a 4-part series *Encounters with Jesus*

from the pulpit of
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John 3:1-17

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.”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.

When the scripture reading for the day contains words as familiar as this one does, it is tempting to focus on that one comforting verse – as if to squeeze the juice out of the text and throw the rest away. But the gospel writer John is a master storyteller, and the conversations we will explore today, and in the coming weeks, are filled with dramatic settings, imagery and symbolism so that through them, we can encounter Jesus as a living Lord.

Tiny little details are treasure houses of significance which flesh out the meaning of who Jesus is and the new life he offers us and the world. Beginning with today’s encounter, for example, in the gospel which describes Jesus as the light coming into the darkness, it is worth paying attention to the fact that Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a Jewish leader in the community, a person of faith and religious practice and yet he comes to Jesus bringing his questions, his uncertainty, and his disbelief. In so doing Nicodemus invites us to bring our questions, our uncertainty and our own disbelief.

Here, Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness, because his faith is unclear and uncertain, and he is apparently seeking to get sufficient evidence to move that faith into clarity and certainty. But faith is never a once-in-a-lifetime clear and certain decision; so much as it is a living thing, capable of growth *and* regression, stasis and change. Nicodemus begins with a statement that is filled with curiosity: *Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher that has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.* Then the two of them begin to talk past each other in a most circuitous route that circles from earthly things like childbirth and flesh and water, to heavenly things like birth from above and Spirit, with a little detour through a most bizarre story about Moses and serpents in the wilderness, on the way to a more comfortable landing on John 3:16 about God's love and eternal life.

Jesus is asking this Religious Seeker to think, saying: You do not need God to come into your life. You need to come into God's life. To think that you can bring God into your own understanding is backwards; God's life is a gift - and beckons you into it. Though you are already all grown up and scholarly, you, Nicodemus, need to be born again *into* the new life God is offering you. "I don't know how to do that," said Nicodemus, "I don't know how to be born all over again into the life of God." And Jesus said, "I see that you do not know or understand, but here is good news for you. The life of God is not far away from you. The life of God has come near to you. Indeed, the life of God is standing right next to you, speaking to you now."¹

What this encounter is all about, is how the unbounded love of God has spilled out into world in the person of Jesus. Like Nicodemus, we all have our set of beliefs, but we have our unbelief too. We have our questions, and we are curious about who this Jesus person is and how he embodies God. And, despite Daylight Savings Time, we are also groping for answers in the dark. Through the darkness of disbelief and

¹ Tom Long, "The Start of the Trail," day1.org, 6/2/12.

uncertainty, we question Jesus. Some are wondering just what is beyond a most recent diagnosis. Some are desperate for a miracle to bridge the abyss that has wedged its way into a family drama - of estrangement so deep it can hardly be brought into the light of day. Our personal darkness is deep, and our outward confusion is palpable.

All of us are in the dark about what is going on in Washington and what the implications will be in our nation and for the world God so loves. Some of us are happy that change is coming fast, political promises are being kept. Others of us cannot believe we have a new EPA Director who does not trust proven environmental science. Some of us are thrilled the new Administration seems good for business and the stock market is soaring. Others of us are concerned the largest famine in Africa ever is right now, spread across Nigeria, Sudan and Somalia, and we are reducing State Department funds for foreign aid.

No matter where we are on the political divide, so many things are up in the air – matters of national security, Russia’s involvement in our government, issues of immigration, healthcare reform that is fair, the freedom of the press, you name it – we’re in the dark with a lot coming at us fast, and some of us even wonder where the providential hand of God is leading us – if there is a God. So we come to Jesus with our questions and he says: Through the darkness of our days, how are you being born again into the life of God?

Theologian Shirley Guthrie was able to take the toughest of theological questions, and answer them in plain spoken language. During a season of roaring conflict in the church about what it means to confess Jesus as Lord of all Creation – when much of the world does not believe in Jesus, Shirley wrote: “Jesus came not just to give his followers everything they want to be happy, successful and secure in this life and the next. He came to announce and inaugurate the kingdom of God, the world-wide reign of God – justice and compassion for all people, everywhere.

Jesus was the friend of sinful, unbelieving or different-believing people, who were excluded and rejected by law-abiding, morally respectable members of the religious establishment. He believed that caring for needy, suffering human beings is more important than conformity to the requirements of theological orthodoxy. He came not to condemn, defeat and lord it over the enemies of God, but to give his life for them to reconcile them to God and each other. By his Spirit, Jesus continues his healing, reconciling, liberating, saving work everywhere to create a whole new humanity in a whole new heaven and earth, even where he is not yet known, confessed and voluntarily served. The good news is that God was, is and will be at work in the risen and living Christ to reconcile the world to God.”²

Sometimes we get so caught up in our own seasons of darkness looking for light, and in wanting to find God as a player on our team, and God beside us looking out the window of our own worldview, that - like Nicodemus – we forget it’s really the other way around. We are invited into God’s life, and our call is to become more like Jesus – loving, healing, befriending strangers, welcoming outsiders, even sacrificing ourselves for the sake of the world God so loves.

Steve Hayner was a bright and gifted Presbyterian pastor who found his calling to ministry through the Intervarsity Christian Fellowship; he earned a PhD in Hebrew and Semitic languages, authored a number of books and ended his career as the President of Columbia seminary. He died of pancreatic cancer less than a year from his diagnosis at the age of 66.

In the end, his most lasting legacy may be how he allowed his searching faith to be publicly shared through his Caring Bridge journal entries. About midway through his treatment he wrote: “I am scheduled to have an MRI to check to see whether the chemo therapy of the last 2 months is having any real effect. So many people are praying and

² Shirley Guthrie, “The Way, the Truth and the Life,” excerpts from *Always Being Reformed*, published in the *Presbyterian Outlook*, 2/11/02, p. 12 ff

hoping, expecting that God is going to intervene in a really spectacular way. With God, nothing is impossible, and I would certainly welcome a miraculous intervention. One person told me how disturbing it is to her to watch so many thousands of prayers on my behalf and yet to see only minimal physical evidence of healing.”

And then, with absolute candor, this biblical scholar and seminary president, a person who many of us saw as having more faith at the dawn of each new day than most of us have in a lifetime, he asked: “Does God really heal? Are the "prayers of the righteous" effective? Does God listen to the desires of our hearts? Does the amount of prayer have any special impact? I truly don't know what God has planned. None of us really knows what the physical symptoms of my cancer will be over time. But life is about a lot more than physical health. It is measured by a lot more than medical tests and vital signs. More important than the particular aspects of God's work with us in the physical, spiritual, mental realms of life, is God's over all presence with us, nourishing, equipping, transforming, empowering, and sustaining us for whatever might be God's call to my life today. Today, my call might be to learn something new about rest. Today, my call might be to encourage another person in some very tangible way. Today, my call might be to learn something new about patience, endurance, and the identification with those who suffer.

As people pray, we are all changed, and we are all called to focus in a new way. Yes, I'm really eager to know what is happening in my body to this cancer. But whatever we find out over the next days, I am more eager that it would help me to be more attentive, more grateful, more loving, more compassionate and more gracious.”³

Through the dark of uncertainty, is stepping into the life of God. In whatever it is that is a dark passage for you, in your personal life, in your concern for the current climate of the nation and world, in your

³ Steve Hayner, CaringBridge entry, July, 2014.

work, in your yearning for more peace and justice...how are you stepping into the life of God? How are we engaging in the healing, reconciling, liberating, saving work of Jesus Christ – who above all else is God’s embodiment of love for the world? How are we becoming more attentive, more grateful, more loving, more compassionate and more gracious?

You know, in the third chapter of John’s gospel, once Jesus starts talking, it doesn’t really say what happened right then to Nicodemus. He must have slipped away under the cover of night as quietly as he had come, scratching his head with bewilderment at what Jesus was saying. But something must have begun to sink in, because Nicodemus appears again at the very end of the gospel. This time he does not slink around under the cover of darkness, but he steps out in broad daylight of a city in turmoil, risking his life. After the crucifixion, Nicodemus showed up with Joseph of Arimathea to help bury the body of Jesus. He came, John writes, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. It was a crazy thing for a person to do, with the witch hunt atmosphere in Jerusalem; even Jesus’ closest disciples had fled the scene in denial and fear. But not Nicodemus. He decides, somehow, that it is worth risking his own life – in order to honor the life of Jesus. The guy with the uncertainty and doubt and questions, who could only approach Jesus through the dark – he becomes the very one who wraps Jesus’ body with linen and spices and lovingly lays it in the tomb.

Through our uncertainty and doubt and questions, through our groping for answers in the dark, how are *we* honoring God’s love for the world in Jesus?