

March 5, 2023 Rev. Kathryn McGinnis

Let us pray. As these words are read and proclaimed, may we be compelled in these next moments amidst all the imperfections and misunderstandings that may come to be yet compelled into your will, your way, and your wisdom. May your grace and truth abound in our hearing and our doing your Word. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the gospel of John, chapter 3, verses 1 through 17. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

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 unless God is with that person.” 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 the 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.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

When God began to create the heavens and the earth on the first day, the first chapter of Genesis tells us that the earth was chaos and darkness covered the waters. God created light by speaking, “Let there be light.” God saw that it was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. The light, God called day. And the darkness, night.

Night has been with us from the very beginning, from that first day of creation, we have had both light and darkness, both day and night.

Light and Darkness, and day and night, are important themes in John’s gospel.

In the beautiful prologue in the first chapter of John we learn that Christ is the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The gospel of John is a unique gospel. A gospel that lives in symbolism, in duality, in ambiguity, and ultimately, in belief.

In John's gospel he stresses that Christ is the incarnate word of God. A word that existed from the very beginning. Who was with God from the very beginning.

In the beginning we had the word. In the beginning we had light. In the beginning we had darkness. We had day. And we had night.

Today's scripture from John includes what is perhaps the most popular verse of the Bible. John 3:16 – 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.

We see this verse everywhere – it's so part of our culture that even people who are not familiar with Christianity or the bible know what John 3:16 is. And it's a beautiful verse. It's a classic verse for a reason, but it is a verse that's almost always taken out of context.

For as long as I've known John 3:16 by heart, it has only been within the last few years that I've known the context in which Jesus says it. And that context is our scripture for today, the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus.

And I think to understand John 3:16 with new depth and beauty, the most important part of this story is actually in verse 2: Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. He comes by night.

John tells us that Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a Jewish leader. Nicodemus doesn't appear in the other gospels, only in John.

And he comes to Jesus with questions. He doesn't understand who Jesus is. Jesus answers, and he still doesn't understand. And he disappears back into the night.

People are quick to judge Nicodemus. He comes at night because he probably doesn't want to be seen by the other Jewish leaders. And he doesn't believe Christ even when the word of God is speaking directly to him.

But there was something about Jesus that captivated him. He calls him Rabbi, a teacher – so he respects Jesus' authority as a Jewish leader. And he speaks the truth about Jesus – he says Jesus has come from God because surely God is with someone who can do these signs, or miracles. And so, he is curious - he wants to know who Jesus is. But Jesus doesn't make it easy for him.

He speaks vaguely – giving no concrete answers. Just answers that invite more questions. And so, Nicodemus asks those questions – logical questions – how *can* someone be born again if they have already been born? Nicodemus doesn't get the answers he wanted.

Maybe he is too attached to rules or earthly logic – his only response comes in verse 9 - how can these things be? And then he goes back into the night.

It's very intentional that Nicodemus is placed in the night. Christ is the light. To believe in Christ is to step into the light out of the darkness.

Those who do not believe in the Word of God, the light of the world, remain in the darkness.

We're quick to judge darkness, to hate the night. Yet it is part of the world God created. It has been from the very first day.

More than just physical darkness, the literal night, there is a feeling of darkness in our world that permeates beyond the bounds of day and night. Bad things happen within the shadows of humanity, and we leave them in the darkness – not wanting to face it in the light of day.

To remain in darkness is to not step into Christ's light. To not embrace the truth the light brings. To not believe.

Because Nicodemus disappears back into the darkness, we can assume he didn't believe. Again, His only response is how can these things be? But what did he not believe?

If we read back over Jesus' answer – I think we can admit that it is a little confusing.

It would take a big leap of faith for him to trust those words that didn't seem to make sense. Especially since he was a Jewish leader and would know the torah – he should be able to understand!

Many of us are like Nicodemus. We see God before us because of the good things God has done around us. But we don't understand who God is. We value understanding over believing so we slip back into the night. Into darkness.

But perhaps the most radical thing about this text is that Jesus *is* in the night. Jesus is the light who shines in the darkness, but the darkness did not overcome it. The darkness remains.

Even in our disbelief, even in the darkest shadows of this world, we can still find Christ's light. Even if it's only a flicker.

We are so quick to try and pull people out of the night, the night is something we cannot tolerate. But not everyone is ready to leave the night. Nicodemus didn't leave the night after speaking with Jesus – but he appears two more times in John's gospel.

Later in chapter 7, Nicodemus briefly appears and defends Jesus in front of the pharisees.

And after Christ is crucified, Nicodemus helps wrap Christ's body according to the burial customs, and he takes his body to be buried in the tomb.

He stepped out from the night to bury Christ with care and intention when no disciples were to be found. For all its darkness, the night does provide a unique, if fleeting, safety.

Nicodemus was likely scared to see Jesus in the light of day – but he found Jesus in the night. *He* sought Jesus out. The night gave him the safety to ask questions he was not ready to speak aloud for all to hear. And it's from these questions in the night that we get one of the most powerful verses in the bible.

Nicodemus asks, "How can these things be?"

And Jesus responds - 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."

God loved the world. A world with darkness and light, day and night. So much that he gave us his only son. And not just to die on the cross. God gave us all of whom Jesus is – his humanity, his divinity, his whole life.

And God gave us all of whom Jesus is in every corner of the world. During the day. And into the night.

And to believe in it - the word of God – is not to recite scripture or doctrine. But to believe is to act.

In John's gospel, believe is always a verb, never a noun. It's a verb that says we must act to be in relationship with God.

So, to believe is to create spaces in this world where God can abide. God can abide in the darkness. In the night.

Maybe instead of trying to force the Nicodemus' of the world out of the night – we bring Christ in. Or rather step to help illuminate the light already in the night.

Just like God, light works in mysterious ways. Christ our light is not only the glorious sun, but the subtle moon. And every shade in between.

One of my favorite hikes back home leads to this mountain outcrop. It's a beautiful place to watch the sunset, but it's a long hike and you can't set up camp right there.

The closest place to camp is about 2 tenths of a mile away from the outcrop. One night I camped there with some friends, and we went to watch the sunset.

It was such a beautiful sunset, I stayed on the outcrop until all the light was gone. I had lost track of time so was a little worried about hiking back.

But as I started back on the trail into the woods to the campsite I realized it was a full moon that night. The light from the moon was so bright I didn't even have to turn my headlamp on, I could see the trail the entire time.

There's darkness in each of us. Through the course of our lives there will be times when we will be like Nicodemus and slip back into the night. And when we search for Christ's light in the darkness – know that sometimes the sun will come out and we'll step into a light so bright we leave night behind.

But sometimes we'll find the moon. A light to guide us safely through the night. A light to answer the questions we're not ready to face in the day. A light that shows the depth and reach of God's love.

Amen.