

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“In the Darkness”

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John 3:1-17

3Now 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.

Some of you were with us for worship on Ash Wednesday. I had something of a revelation that evening as we prepared for worship services that evening. As I gazed over the beauty of our Meeting House, illuminated against the darkness by the softer light of our chandeliers, I realized that we don’t get to enjoy that experience very much. I wasn’t quite so thrilled about the darkness when I struggled to drive home in the fog later than night! But there is something very simple and beautiful about the shadows that are cast in this room in the evening, and the stark contrast between the white walls and ceiling and the surrounding darkness of the night. There is something about approaching God in the darkness that creates a greater sense of mystery and awe.

We worship at night very rarely. I think that is a terrible waste of atmosphere and beauty. There is Ash Wednesday. There is Maundy Thursday. And there is Christmas Eve. That’s it. For much of the year, people are too busy doing other things to come to church and worship at night. We worship on a Sunday morning when our life activities are a little less urgent-unless you happen to have a child in soccer or swimming or hockey or baseball- but

that's another story. For part of the year, when the darkness is the greater part of the day, we don't like venturing out into the night. It is not inviting. It is cold and threatening. It is difficult to see what might await us on the frozen roads and slippery parking lots. Because of habit and schedule, we can usually only imagine worshipping on Sunday mornings.

The darkness is a fearful thing. In the creation story, God separated light from the darkness before the world was created. The darkness was "pushed back" before anything else in all creation would come into being. The prophet Isaiah writes, in words that we recall at Christmas, "The people who live in darkness have seen a great light, those who have dwelled in the land of shadows, upon them a light has dawned." In the gospel of John, Jesus is described in the very first chapter as "the light of the world." He has come to shine into the darkness and the darkness will not overcome his light. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls his followers to be the light of the world, to let their light shine unto others to offer the very presence of God. The apostle Paul, in a lesson we will read in a couple of weeks, refers to Christians as "children of the light."

Darkness though becomes a symbol of something negative. It is the condition of sin. It is a symbol for ignorance and the inability to see the truth. It is a place of cold and fear. It is the environment where one struggles to flourish and even survive. We seek the light and associate our experience of God with illumination and vision.

The gospel of John describes Nicodemus coming to visit Jesus at night. He has come because being a well-informed man he has heard of Jesus' reputation for teaching about God and the law. He has come because he is a man who is theologically well-educated and he is uncertain about things of faith, perhaps even confused in his belief. The author of John makes a special point of saying this visit occurs at night. Perhaps that part of the story is factually true. Nicodemus waited until the cover of darkness to visit Jesus and to ask him his questions. He didn't want to be seen by anyone else. Imagine the embarrassment if the other scribes and teachers saw him seeking the advice of this seemingly popular but very unofficial man of God. It would be beneath a professional scholar such as Nicodemus to be seen with an amateur like Jesus.

But perhaps the author of John, as he was known to do, was simply using the word night to illustrate Nicodemus' spiritual condition. He was living in darkness. He was confused. He was short on understanding. He could not see that which was important. He came because he was afraid of the dark and he wanted a fast explanation which would bring light and clarity to all things in his life.

But Jesus did not bring out the powerful beacon and shine it upon Nicodemus' path. Jesus did not provide easy answers which would bring precise clarity to Nicodemus' plans. Instead Jesus invited Nicodemus into the mystery of a relationship with God. Jesus spoke of water and spirit. Jesus spoke of wind and being born again. His teaching to the teacher was not one of seeking certainty in a world without shadows. Instead it was a call to embrace trust and to follow the Spirit where it might blow in life. Instead it was call for vision to see even in the darkness.

The conversation with Nicodemus is one we reflect upon during the season of Lent because it is a good thing to remember this sacred season. This is a time in which we examine our hearts and souls. This is a time to consider where we have fallen short and where the night still obscures our desired pathways. It is a time to acknowledge the darkness and to seek the presence of God that can help us see hope despite the gloom. It is a time to reflect upon life's shadows, not as frightening specters to escape, but as images which reflect a subtle light which offers hope and encouragement. This is the season to acknowledge that faith is usually tested in the night. This is a season to acknowledge the need for God to help us see in the dark.

In a sermon Patricia DeJong writes of a deep-sea diver's experience of darkness and light. "En route to the floor of the ocean the diver first passes through the belt of fishes. This is a wide band of light reflected from the surface of the sea. From this area he moves to a depth

of water that cannot be penetrated by light above the surface. It is dark, forbidding, eerie. The diver's immediate reaction is apt to be one of fear and sometimes a sudden spasm of panic that soon passes. As he drops deeper and deeper into the abyss, slowly his eyes begin to pick up the luminous quality of the darkness; what was fear is relaxed and he moves into the lower region with confidence and peculiar vision."

Faith is not a bright light that clearly illuminates all we encounter and experience. It is a training of our eyes to see God at work in the dark. It is a training of our senses to be attentive to mystery and possibility. This is a season to recall that Jesus' ministry and God's greatest work came to be not in the midst of a bright, beautiful day on the height of a spiritual mountaintop. It came to be in the darkness of a late afternoon on a hill they called "The Place of the Skull." This is a time to give thanks that we have a God who talks with us and teaches us, even in the night.