

**A Sermon by the Reverend John S. McDuffie**  
**The Second Sunday in Lent**  
**March 8, 2020**

Genesis 12:1-4a  
Psalm 121  
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17  
John 3:1-17

Today is the beginning of a series of four Sundays in which we will hear wonderful passages from the Gospel of John, each depicting an encounter and ensuing conversation between Jesus and various persons. This Sunday we hear of Jesus in conversation with Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee, a religious leader, a learned man and student of the Hebrew scripture and the faith tradition of Israel. He came to Jesus by night and salutes Jesus with words of praise: “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 answers Nicodemus by saying, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

I imagine that you’ve been told countless times in prior sermons you’ve heard on this passage that the word in Greek (anōthen) that here is translated as “born from above” can also be translated as “born again.” There is word play going on in Jesus’ response to Nicodemus, which he doesn’t get. And to summarize the rest of the conversation, there is more word play that follows, and the more that Jesus speaks, the more confused Nicodemus becomes. He came to Jesus at night, in the dark, and he leaves Jesus “in the dark.” This morning’s passage concludes with one of the best-known verses in the Bible: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.”

Traditionally, we supposed “insiders” in the faith have tended to scoff at Nicodemus and berate him. He comes to Jesus at night: we know that night and darkness are often symbols in our faith tradition for the absence of God, and the presence of disorder and chaos. Think of the chilling verse in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter in John, in which Judas departs from Jesus at the last supper: “He went out. And it was night.” We also assume that Nicodemus was cowardly; he came to Jesus under cover of darkness because he was afraid that his friends would find out about his visit with Jesus. And people in the faith tradition who believe that one has to have a specific “born again” experience with Christ to have an authentic faith life really tend to jump on Nicodemus. “He just doesn’t get it, does he?” they might say, “and of course, we do get it!”

But I want to turn the tables on us this morning, if we have that tendency to put this guy down—because I believe that if we think about where we all are at this moment time, we’re going to discover that we are right there, with Nicodemus, in the dark. I’m mindful of the proverbial “elephant in the room” this morning, which is COVID-19, the coronavirus. We are each of us staring into the unknown at this time, with the specter of this disease increasingly affecting everything that we are about, and how we live our lives. There is so much uncertainty about how

the illness is going to progress, and whether or not we are indeed facing a full-blown pandemic. Precautions are being issued, and we will summarize them for Christ Church in the announcements today.

The daily news reports on coronavirus lead to uncertainty; and uncertainty leads to fear, and anxiety, and possibly impotent rage and despair. We are people who like to be self-sufficient, in control, and seemingly managing with grace our positive lifestyles. But now we're confronted with the fact that we're no longer in control, and it is distressing. The markets tumble, commerce is interrupted, and public events are in question for the future. Can we say that all of this can lead as well to a crisis in faith?

It is here that I am grateful to the work of the Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor. In May of 2013 I was fortunate to hear her preach a sermon on our Gospel passage this morning. Her effort was essentially to rehabilitate Nicodemus and make him an exemplar of a particular kind of faith experience that she terms "endarkment", as opposed to "enlightenment." When we are endarkened, we come to a place where our logic no longer has a foothold, and we become afraid. She explains it this way, in a book that she subsequently published called Learning to Walk in the Dark:

"Darkness" is shorthand for anything that scares me—that I want no part of—either because I am sure that I do not have the resources to survive it, or because I do not want to find out. The absence of God is in there, along with the fear of dementia and the loss of those nearest and dearest to me. So is the melting of polar ice caps, the suffering of children, and the nagging question of what it will feel like to die. If I had my way, I would eliminate everything from chronic back pain to the fear of the devil from my life and the lives of those I love—if I could just find the right night-lights to leave on.

At least I think I would. The problem is this: when, despite all my best efforts, the lights have gone off in my life (literally or figuratively, take your pick), plunging me into the kind of darkness that turns my knees to water, nonetheless I have not died. The monsters have not dragged me out of bed and taken me from their lair. The witches have not turned me into a bat. Instead I have learned things in the dark that I never could have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as well as I need light.

Barbara Brown Taylor encourages us to learn how to walk in the dark, as a particular kind of journey in faith. It is not a comfortable journey—there are no ready guideposts, and no straight way along the path. But if we can learn how to take some deep breaths along the way and have an overarching sense of radical trust, we will come out into the light, and always with a differing sense of who we are, and who God is—or isn't. Back to our friend Nicodemus for a moment—he was interested in Jesus because of the signs he performed, but Jesus tells him that there is more to embracing God than signs—it has to do with the spirit, undefinable and blowing where it will. Nicodemus leaves confused and in the dark; but that is not the last we see of him in the Gospel. He shows up again, on the night of Jesus' death—as witness not to signs and wonders, but to Christ's suffering. And he, along with Joseph of Arimathea will feel the wounds on Jesus' broken body as they dress him and prepare him for burial. The light of the resurrection awaits Nicodemus.

So as we continue in this dark time for the world, let us travel not with certainty but with immortal hope, being attentive to the new insights we may learn along the way. Let us exercise

all due caution, but let us also have hearts of compassion and caring for the whole human family, because we're all in this together. Let us all learn how to take some deep breaths—all, of course some six feet from our neighbors!

Let me close by reading to you one of my very favorite poems, written by the late Jane Kenyon, The world lost her to leukemia at the age of 47. She lived with her husband, the poet Donald Hall, in rural New Hampshire. The poem is called "Let Evening Come". The imagery relates to the farm where she lived, and I love the last verse:

*Let the light of late afternoon  
shine through chinks in the barn, moving  
up the bales as the sun moves down.*

*Let the cricket take up chafing  
as a woman takes up her needles  
and her yarn. Let evening come.*

*Let the dew collect on the hoe abandoned  
in long grass. Let the stars appear  
and the moon disclose her silver horn.*

*Let the fox go back to its sandy den.  
Let the wind die down. Let the shed  
go black inside. Let evening come.*

*To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop  
In the oats, to air in the lung  
Let evening come.*

*Let it come, as it will, and don't  
be afraid. God does not leave us  
comfortless, so let evening come.*

Don't be afraid, as we travel together in this dark time. God will not leave us comfortless.