

## *Nick at Night*

A Sermon Preached by the  
Reverend Gale W. Robb  
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
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Genesis 12:1-4a  
John 3:1-17

Richard Lischer, a professor at Duke Divinity School, writes, “One of the disadvantages of being both a Lutheran and an academician is that you hear so few good conversion stories.”<sup>1</sup> But here’s one of them that he tells about his own experience as a parish pastor. He writes, “In a church I served, one of the pillars of the congregation stopped by my office just before services began to tell me he’d been ‘born again.’

“‘You’ve been what?’ I asked.

“‘Yes,’ he said, ‘last week I visited my brother-in-law’s church, the Running River of Life Tabernacle, and I don’t know what it was, but something happened and I’m born again.’

“‘You can’t be born again,’ I said, ‘you’re a Lutheran. You are the chairman of the board of trustees.’ He was brimming with joy, but I was sulking. Why? Because spiritual renewal is wonderful as long as it occurs within acceptable, usually mainline, channels and does not threaten my understanding of God.”<sup>2</sup>

So it was, perhaps, with the Pharisee Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night, under the cover of darkness, trying to understand this itinerant preacher named Jesus, who talked about being born of the Spirit, about being born again.

Most of us, like Nicodemus or Richard Lischer, bring a healthy skepticism, and lots of questions, to ideas that we simply cannot get our minds around, just as we do to reports of things we cannot explain. The face of the Virgin Mary in a grilled cheese sandwich, for example, subsequently sold on e-Bay to a casino in Las Vegas for several thousand dollars. Or the news article a couple of years ago about the woman in Texas who had seen the face of Jesus in the ceiling tiles in her bedroom, and was now holding prayer meetings in that room, reporting that people left with their faith renewed, perhaps some of them even claiming to have been born again. We ask questions, and more questions, or different questions, and most often finally decide that it really was simply a badly burned grilled cheese sandwich or a watermark from a leaky roof.

Just as Nicodemus has no place in his structured, learned world for the kind of answers that Jesus provides, neither do we have much room for that which we cannot explain. Like Nicodemus, we ask, “How can this be?”

Much has been made of the timing of Nicodemus’ visit. There is support for the idea that Nicodemus came at night because he wanted to avoid being seen consorting with this controversial teacher by others in the Pharisaic community. Others see the

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Lischer, “Pick it up, read it.” *Christian Century*, February 17, 1999, p. 179.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Lischer, “Acknowledgement,” *Christian Century*, March 3, 1999, p. 245.

darkness as the metaphor John uses to talk about separation from God. But one commentator writes that an “alternate interpretation (might be) more instructive.” She goes on to explain that, “The rabbis taught that the Torah was best studied at night when it was quiet and the distractions of the day had subsided. Nicodemus uses his precious study time to expand his search beyond the standard texts. In this view, Jesus himself becomes the book into which Nicodemus delves, mining every word for wisdom and understanding.”<sup>3</sup>

That same writer wonders if we might call Nicodemus the Patron Saint of Seekers. Perhaps like all of us, Nicodemus came to Jesus hungry to learn more about the life of the spirit, because nothing we can put our hands on or our minds around is filling up that God-shaped hole in our hearts. The story is told of the woman who set out to discover the meaning of life. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tells better than I can. She writes:

“First (the woman) read everything she could get her hands on – history, philosophy, psychology, religion. While she became a very smart person, nothing she read gave her the answer she was looking for. She found other smart people and asked them about the meaning of life, but while their discussions were long and lively, no two of them agreed on the same thing and still she had no answer.

“Finally she put all her belongings in storage and set off in search of the meaning of life. She went to South America. She went to India. Everywhere she went, people told her they did not know the meaning of life, but they had heard of a man who did, only they were not sure where he lived. She asked about him in every country on earth until finally, deep in the Himalayas, someone told her how to reach his house – a tiny little hut perched on the side of a mountain just below the tree line.

“She climbed and climbed to reach his front door. When she finally got there, with knuckles so cold they hardly worked, she knocked.

“‘Yes?’” said the kind-looking man who opened it. She thought she would die of happiness.

“I have come halfway around the world to ask you one question,” she said, gasping for breath. “What is the meaning of life?”

“Please come in and have some tea,” the old man said.

“No” she said, “I mean, no thank you. I didn’t come all this way for tea. I came for an answer. Won’t you tell me, please, what is the meaning of life?”

“We shall have tea,” the old man replied, so she gave up and came inside. While he was brewing the tea she caught her breath and began telling him about all the books she had read, all the people she had met, all the places she had been. The old man listened (which was just as well, since his visitor did not leave any room for him to reply), and as she talked he placed a fragile tea cup in her hand. Then he began to pour the tea.

“She was so busy talking that she did not notice when the tea cup was full, so the old man just kept pouring until the tea ran over the sides of the cup and spilled to the floor in a steaming waterfall.

“What are you doing?!” she yelled when the tea burned her hand. “It’s full, can’t you see that? Stop? There’s no more room!”

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<sup>3</sup> Patricia Farris, “Late-night Seminar,” *Christian Century*, January 30-February 6, 2002, p. 19.

“Just so,” the old man said to her. “You come here wanting something from me, but what am I to do? There is no room in your cup. Come back when it is empty and then we will talk.”

Taylor concludes by saying, “(Jesus) poured tea all over his visitor’s hand and said, in effect, that Nicodemus already had gallons of answers available to him. What he needed was one drop of experience – one moment of new birth – and he could leave all his answers lying in puddles on the floor.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again, and Nicodemus responds, as one writer put it, “in his best left-brain, legal-scholar, word-parsing mode. He seeks tricks, deadends and practical impossibilities. It is all he knows how to see.”

The Greek word, *anōthen*, used in this passage can mean either “again” or “from above.” And it’s evident from the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus that Nicodemus is hearing it as “again” and Jesus is talking about being born “from above.”

Likewise, later in the passage, the Greek word *pneuma* can mean both wind and spirit, much like the Hebrew equivalent *ruach*. Does the wind blow where it will, or is Jesus talking about the Spirit? Nicodemus might say, “Teacher, do you mean *pneuma* in the theological sense of ‘spirit,’ or in the more ordinary sense of ‘wind’?” And Jesus says, “Yes.”

W.H. Auden said it’s hard to be a Christian if you’re not something of a poet. While Nicodemus is mired in the literal and legalistic world, Jesus is using language that is poetic, metaphorical, suggestive and imaginative, and it will take more than this one conversation in the dark for Nicodemus to empty himself of all that he knows so that he might have room for the new life that Jesus is offering, life that is born from above.

The account of Nicodemus also has a communal component that we cannot overlook. New Testament professor David Rensberger reminds us that for the Gospel writer, Nicodemus also represents a group that was present in the Johannine community, and calls our attention to the change in significant shift to plural pronouns in verse 11. “You” – which up to this point has referred to Nicodemus – now essentially becomes “you people.” “Its members were prepared to acknowledge Jesus as having been a divinely sent teacher and miracle worker, perhaps as standing in the line of the prophets, but no more than this. Rensberger writes, “Apparently they hoped to be disciples of Jesus but also to remain within the framework of synagogue Judaism,” and since known Christians were being expelled from the synagogue in the Johannine community, they felt obliged to keep their identity as secret believers hidden.

He goes on to conclude that, “For the secret Christian Pharisees symbolized by Nicodemus, the problem is partly their fear of losing their position through a public confession of Jesus and partly their unwillingness to see in him one essentially different from themselves. They are, and wish to remain, ‘the teachers of Israel,’ and if Jesus too can somehow be fitted into this category, well and good. Any radical departures – a new birth, a resurrection, a gift that transcends the law of Moses, a man who comes down from heaven – would take them beyond where are willing to go.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Stay for tea, Nicodemus,” *Christian Century*, February 21, 1996, p. 195.

<sup>5</sup> David Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and the Liberating Community*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988, pp. 40, 59.

cost of following Jesus, the cost of being born from above, was too high and asked more of them than they were prepared to give.

We don't know how long Nicodemus stayed in the half-light, moving back and forth between the familiar world where his status was recognized and his worldview reliable, and this new world of being born from above. We come upon him later in the Gospel as a member of the Sanhedrin urging his colleagues to hear Jesus before passing judgment on him. And then he appears one last time in the Gospel of John, when he joins Joseph of Arimathea, characterized as another secret disciple, to take away Jesus' body after the crucifixion, bringing gifts of expensive ointments, myrrhs and aloes, to anoint the body for burial.

Lent is traditionally a time when we empty ourselves so that we are open to rebirth and resurrection. We give up what's not working, we take on new spiritual disciplines, we let go. On Wednesday night, those of us who gather for dinner here at the church began a Lenten discipline of different prayer practices.

We began with centering prayer, which invites us to choose a word that represents God for us – whether it's God, Jesus, Spirit, Mother, Father, love, faith, trust, mercy – whatever means God for you, and then spend time in silence, with your eyes closed, focusing on that one word, letting everything else fall away. In the silence, you let go of all that you brought into the room with you, so that all the problems and worries and cares of the day fade into the farthest recesses of your mind and you are resting in the light and love of God. When something nudges its way back in, you simply call yourself back to God by finding the sacred word.

It's much more difficult than you might imagine – and please think about joining us on Wednesday evenings during Lent as we continue to explore different prayer practices. Like the woman seeking the meaning of life, we are so busy filling up with the things that don't matter, we don't realize that there's no room for what does. Like Nicodemus, our vision is so limited, sometimes so literal, that it doesn't matter how many questions we ask, we're just not going to get it.

We probably all know people, like Rev. Lischer's parishoner, who can tell you the exact moment that they were "born again." Perhaps even some of us can make that same claim. Others of us understand that concept to be an ongoing, lifelong commitment that begins again every day, when we have another chance to empty ourselves of what doesn't matter in order to fill ourselves with what does. When we have another chance to open ourselves to the Spirit's movement in our lives. And "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." May be so for all of us this holy Lenten season. Amen.