

## Conversations in the Night

John 3:1-16

March 14, 2021

As a young man growing up, I was always a bit of an insomniac. Probably got it from my father. He was too. I remember many late nights unable to sleep. I would go downstairs, and often there was my father laying on the living room sofa, listening to the radio. He was a big fan of late night talk radio, some of which were religious in nature.

I can still see the glow from his radio shining through the darkness. There I would sit, talking sometimes for a couple hours about everything under the sun. It was when I felt comfortable somehow to ask the many questions. We had many heart-to-heart conversations. Night-time wasn't always a time to sleep, but sometimes to feel fully engaged and connected with my father.

What about you? Do you ever have trouble sleeping at night? What keeps you awake? Is it worries about your health or someone you love? Financial worries? Concerns about your grandchildren? Global warming? What about covid? Do you know anyone who was infected and is still experiencing long-term symptoms? And what about our nation? For over a year now we have been ravished by the disease. We have lost over a half-million people, with many others in the hospital or facing lengthy recoveries. We all lose sleep if we think about that too long.

I venture to say there are many parents out there who are losing sleep because their son or daughter is not doing well with online learning, and they are falling behind. Others lose sleep because they lost their job or can't pay the rent. In many ways, it feels like the world has been plunged into a long, protracted period of "darkness" for over a year now, even when the sun is shining. The nagging worries won't go away.

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I don't know what troubled Nicodemus or what kept him awake at night. Many students of the bible have ventured an educated guess. In John's gospel today, we hear a story that took place at night in Jerusalem some 2000 years ago. The public ministry of Jesus was just getting off the ground, but already he was causing quite a stir among the people. He had just turned water into wine at a wedding reception; that was the first of his many miracles. In a show of power, Jesus tipped over the tables of the moneychangers, as you heard last week.

Now, while he is visiting the holy city of Jerusalem, a man comes to him under the cover of darkness to ask Jesus a question. But it was not just any man. It was Nicodemus, a Pharisee, and a member of the Jewish religious and civil court called the Sanhedrin.

The Pharisees were very strict and legalistic. They also wielded a lot of power. They created and enforced the religious rules, and punished people for breaking them. They split hairs, and at the same time, bent the rules to accommodate their own hypocritical lives. Sounds like many politicians today. God help those who got in their way, because their persecution could be swift and brutal.

Jesus *did* get in their way. It was one among a mounting number of reasons that Jesus would soon be put to death. It ultimately boiled down to the fact that Jesus got in the way of the religious authorities of the day, and they didn't like it.

So here was Nicodemus, a leader of these rigid Pharisees who came to Jesus at night so that no one would see him. It could get him in trouble. Maybe even lose his position. But Nicodemus was curious about Jesus. He may have felt unsettled or had spiritual questions tugging at his heart. What should he do?

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Many of us come to Jesus at "night" in an existential sense at one time or another in our lives. All the great religions of the world have those who are seeking enlightenment in their darkness. Nicodemus was no different. He said, "Rabbi, we know that you come from God as a teacher, for no one could perform these signs you do unless God were with him."

That was already a good start. Apparently, Nicodemus was not alone in his curiosity. Other Pharisees spoke in whispered voices late at night about the impact Jesus was having. Some worried that Jesus would try and change the religious beliefs of the multitudes. Others were genuinely hungry for a spirituality that wasn't fixated on such harsh, binding rules.

By day the Pharisees argued, attacked and condemned every action of Jesus, but by night, Nicodemus and others wondered secretly if he just might be the one sent by God. Jesus answered him by saying, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again (or from above)." What an enigmatic, perplexing thought. What did he mean? Nicodemus wondered how he could possibly crawl back inside his mother's womb in order to be born a second time.

Now the Greek word in question here can be translated as both "again" as well as "from above." Even those who have trouble saying they have been born again may point to ways they have already been born from above.

When you're born from above, your identity is shaped by a wondrous living God, and not by the world. When you're born from above, you're adopted by a new loving family and heritage. This new family lineage runs thicker than blood. Every time we are moved

by God's spirit, we let go of our earthly limitations, and receive the grace and power that enables us to be born again and born from above.

When you're born from above, you can stop judging yourself and others harshly, and embrace instead God's amazing grace. When you're born from above, you can always make a new start, no matter what you have done in the past.

Jesus was saying that a person must have both a physical birth and a spiritual birth, but Nicodemus could not comprehend how this could possibly be. This was no doubt the subject of the late night conversations between Nicodemus and Jesus, and for many people still today.

Jesus is astonished that Nicodemus, who is well-educated and supposed to be an authority in religious matters does not grasp the most elementary of spiritual truths. Then Jesus offers Nicodemus the greatest gift that he would ever receive, when he said these well-known words: *"For God so loved the world that God gave an only son, so that whoever believes will not die, but will have life everlasting,"* beginning today.

All his life, Nicodemus perceived God to be a harsh judge; a demanding task-master who must be appeased with animal sacrifices and perfect obedience in addition to rules and more rules.

How about you? Were you brought up in a strict household? Rules you were expected to follow "or else?" Nicodemus was. Yet in this late night conversation, God is described as one who loves and forgives, and welcomes those who feel lost – even the Pharisees. Nicodemus was a changed man.

It's not so different for us. We sit here with many of the same questions and doubts some 2000 years later. Would Jesus have the same conversations with us? How can God love someone like me – broken, imperfect, doubting? Will God reject me when my faith goes south?

The concept of sin in the New Testament is that someone has missed the mark – like an archer who misses the target. We have not claimed the abundant life God has prepared and wants us to have.

Yet, this is the truth we all need to hear: It is more about grace, and not works; about being open to the divine – and I say divine because I'm not limiting it to our Judeo-Christian concept of God. Transformation and change can take place when you allow yourself to be born from above – like allowing the transcendent dimension of the Divine to form and transform who you are.

Dare to ask the hard spiritual questions like Nicodemus asked of Jesus – maybe ones you have been reluctant to ask. Find time to quiet your spirit, and notice what comes up for you. Read some good spiritual books that ask worthwhile questions. Books by writers like Thomas Merton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Richard Rohr, and others come to mind. We can be born from above – born of a resplendent realm. We can also be renewed and born again when we realize the Spirit and essence of God dwells within everyone.

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Nicodemus showed all the signs of a new beginning. You might say he was born again *and* born from above. God can set up a workshop in our heart, or as some would say, the divine spirit can bubble up from within.

There is something about the darkness that is not so threatening when you allow the Spirit to enter your life. The pace of life slows when the sun goes down, and we consider the most important truths of life. You can move from darkness into light.

I'm born from above every day. When I get out of bed and have a cup of coffee and watch the sun come up, I'm born from above. When my wife gives me a hug and says, "Have a good day," I'm born from above. When I walk in the woods with my dog, or she gives me a friendly lick, I'm born from above, and I try and not take it for granted.

Every cell in my body and every thought that crosses my mind is not the same as it was yesterday. Every day is a new day and an opportunity for blessing. That might be Jesus' final piece of advice to Nicodemus. Don't be weighed down by the past. Don't be encumbered by rigid rules today or ever.

And by the way, in case you are still wondering about Nicodemus, God wasn't done with him back in chapter 3. In what surely is a testimony to being born again, Nicodemus changed and grew in God's grace.

In chapter 7, Nicodemus would come to the defense of Jesus before the council, saying that Jesus should not be condemned before receiving a fair trial. And then after the crucifixion, Nicodemus came with Joseph of Arimathea to take the body of Jesus and anoint it with expensive spices before gently laying his body in the tomb.

Those late night conversations paid off. Nicodemus risked his status, his reputation, and his very life, all because of conversations late at night with the master, under the cover of darkness. Nicodemus knew surely and finally that if John 3:16 means anything at all, it means that you be born again of God's spirit, and not just once, but every day.

I hope the next time you can't sleep, you can let the wonder of it all enter your soul. Just ask Nicodemus. Amen

## John 3:1-16

3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

3:2 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 apart from the presence of God."

3:3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

3:4 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?"

3:5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

3:6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

3:7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'

3:8 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."

3:9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

3:10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

3:11 "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.

3:12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

3:13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

3:14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

3:15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.