

3-1-26 sermon

Psalm 121; John 3.1-17

This week, the Revised Common Lectionary gave us a choice of two Gospel passages. One from the main Gospel assigned in Year A – Matthew – and the one I just read, from John. Which contains probably the most well-known verse in all of the Bible. Probably because of all those people holding up signs behind the goalposts during extra point attempts. I chose the passage from John because it's such a well-known text, and also – as I'm flying to the UK tomorrow and have been scrambling to get my ducks in a row this week – it's a text I've preached before, so I wasn't starting from scratch! However, like many if not most of us, I woke up yesterday to the news that the United States and Israel had bombed Iran – again. Although I learned that from reading a WhatsApp message from a friend in Bethlehem. Who wrote, "We are sitting in our homes listening to the violent, deafening bombardments. The walls shake. The sky flashes. The children are afraid again. They ask questions we do not know how to answer. Their small hands cover their ears. Their eyes search ours for reassurance we struggle to give. So we are asking you, please pray for us. And pray that hearts of leaders will soften before more blood is shed." And as I sat in Dry Stack yesterday morning, my half-written sermon felt disconnected from this moment. So I tried to listen again to the text, and see what the written Word might have to offer us for such a time as this.

What struck me as I read the text once again was the introduction: "Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Judaeans. He came to Jesus by night." Why? Why come by night? I assume because Jesus is developing something of a reputation, one that the leaders of his people feel threatened by in some way, and so Nicodemus doesn't want anyone to see him with Jesus. But he comes anyway. Why? Obviously, there's no way of knowing the internal life of a person who lived two thousand years later. But we can make educated guesses at people's motivation for the actions they take, while holding those guesses lightly. Nicodemus addresses Jesus, "Rabbi," which indicates that Nicodemus sees Jesus as someone like him. A teacher of the Law. One called to guide his people on faithful paths as God's people. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God..." Who is the "we" here? The Pharisees as a group? Some of the Pharisees Nicodemus hangs out with? The people as a whole? Again, there's no way of knowing, but I suspect he's referring to the crowds, because we will discover the pharisees see nothing good in Jesus. And how do the crowds know this? John tells us, "...for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." But those "signs" are very limited at this point in the Gospel of John. Jesus has turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and – John tells us – his *disciples* believed in him after this first sign. But there's only more sign before Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. And Jesus performed *that* sign in the Temple in Jerusalem during Passover.

In the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – Jesus performs this sign at the beginning of Holy Week, a few days before his execution, three years into his public ministry, but John places the story at the very *beginning* of Jesus’ public ministry. The sign is what is often called, “The cleansing of the temple.” Jesus enters the temple and finds people selling animals for sacrifice, and moneychangers seated at tables, exchanging Jewish and Roman coins for the approved temple coinage. Jesus braids some cords to make a whip, then drives the animals out of the temple, then turns over the tables of the moneychangers, sending them scrambling for the coins rolling around. John tells us that, “many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing.” Perhaps Nicodemus was one of “the many.” Perhaps he even surprised himself to find himself believing in this rabbi who had caused such a stir.

Whatever the case, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, and says, “You’ve come from God.” To which Jesus replies, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Which feels a bit like a non-sequitur! But, perhaps that’s the unspoken question Nicodemus has for this rabbi, and Jesus is answering it. Because, immediately before this, John tells us, “Jesus knew what was in everyone.” So perhaps he knows what’s in Nicodemus, and so answers the unasked question. Nicodemus doesn’t respond, “Uh, OK. Not sure where that came from.” He says, “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” And then we get into what feels like a bit of an esoteric conversation about water and the Spirit, and flesh, and wind, which causes Nicodemus to ask, “How can these things be?” Jesus goes on to talk about testimony and earthly versus heavenly things, and serpents in the wilderness and Moses, and the Son of Man, and finally, eternal life. “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.” Or, perhaps we should try it in the King James Version, because that’s probably the one most people know. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whomsoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.” And now let’s continue with John 3.17... Anyone? I wonder why we’ve learned John 3.16, but not John 3.17: “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.”

Maybe that’s why Nicodemus came: because he was tired of *condemning* the world. Tired, perhaps, of being part of a system that was supposed to uphold the Law of God, but which often made life that much more difficult for those whose lives were already hard-scrabble. Tired, perhaps, of watching his fellow Pharisees meticulously keep the Law themselves. Tithing even the herbs from their gardens, but who – as Jesus will charge them – ignored “the weightier matters of the Law: justice, and mercy, and faith.” Tired of performative religion, doing everything to be seen by others, but when those others are struggling, not being willing to lift a finger to help them. Tired of going through the motions, but always feeling like something was missing.

I have no way of knowing if all that was why Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, or if it was something else entirely. But clearly he saw something in this rabbi that he did not see in himself, or in his fellow pharisees: The presence of God. And apparently, he was drawn to that. Perhaps even hungry for that.

We only encounter Nicodemus two more times in the Gospel of John. The next time is in chapter 7, when his fellow Pharisees and the chief priests want to arrest Jesus, sending the temple guard to do so, because he's a threat to the world as they understand it. A threat to the world they've made for themselves, a world that works very much in their favor. But the temple guard return – without Jesus – sounding a lot like Nicodemus, when their leaders ask, “Why didn't you arrest him?!” and responding, “Never has anyone spoken like this!” The Pharisees reply, “Surely you haven't been deceived too? Do you see any of us believing in him? Do you? Do you?” And in that moment, I think Nicodemus saw two paths open up before him: keep silent. Go along to get along. Or put his hand up and say, “I do. I believe in him.” Well, he doesn't quite manage that. But he does say, “We don't judge people without first giving them a hearing, right? We follow due process here, according to the Law, right?” To which they reply, “Surely you're not also from Galilee are you? Surely you haven't been taken in like the crowds – who don't even *know* the Law!” But the question is left hanging as to what Nicodemus actually believes.

Until the very end of John's gospel, where we meet Nicodemus for a third time. Jesus has been crucified – the Pharisees have made good their threat to silence him. This guy, Joseph of Arimathea asks the Roman Governor, Pilate, for Jesus' body to bury him, and who's the only other person there to help?

Nicodemus.

Who brings a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloe in order to prepare Jesus' body for a dignified burial. And word about *that* will get out. Nicodemus has made his choice. He *does* believe in Jesus. He has found something in Jesus so compelling that something new has been birthed in him. He has found something in Jesus so compelling that, even with Jesus now *dead*, he has turned his back on all that he knew, all the privilege he enjoyed, and was finding a new home with the community that gathered around Jesus. A community who had known only condemnation from the powerful and the guardians of religious life. But a community who had experienced the truth of John chapter 3, verse 17, “For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

I confess that I might be projecting onto Nicodemus this morning. For I feel tired this morning. Tired of men with power who wrap themselves in a semblance of faith, but who act in ways that deny their words.

Men who would pass laws to post the Ten Commandments in public schools and other public places, but who, apparently, feel free to break them in personal and public life, knowing that they won't be held to account. In fact, they may well be praised for it. They'll covet what others have – and take it for themselves. They'll bear false witness against their neighbors, and to their neighbors, and receive applause while they do it. They'll steal from the vulnerable, and the sick and the poor, and pass the proceeds on to their wealthy friends. They'll talk about the importance of pursuing peace, then go to war and bomb hospitals and schools. They'll break every single one of the Ten Commandments, and take the name of the Lord in vain while doing so.

Brennan Manning, one of my favorite authors, a Marine Corps veteran who became a Franciscan monk, and who happened to be an alcoholic, once remarked that when people tried to call him a saint, he would respond, “No. I'm an angel with an incredible capacity for beer.” In one of his books, Brennan made this observation: “The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians: who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”

Nicodemus was deep in the world of public faith. And apparently saw a disconnect between what his peers espoused and how they lived. So much so, that when a rabbi appeared in whom there was no disconnect, he went to him at night, and said, “I see God in you.” And maybe whispered, “And I want what you have.” And Jesus responded, “You'll have to start all over again then. But know this: God did not send me to condemn the world, but to save it. Because God loves the world. So much so that he has given me. And I will give myself.

And that's what faith requires – self-giving love.

I'm so tired of expressions of faith that are self-serving. That are self-seeking. That are self-congratulating. Like Nicodemus, I'm tired of the disconnect between espoused faith and lived faith, including in my own life. Nicodemus had to choose between a system that worked well for him, but not so much for others, and the way of Jesus. It took him a while, but he got there in the end. Even with Jesus *dead*, he still chose the way of self-denying love, over that of self-serving, self-justifying condemnation.

May you and I move in that same direction also. Amen.