

“Stories that Matter” by Pastor Leah Rosso
Lent 2: John 3: 1-21 (Nicodemus visits Jesus)
March 1, 2026

This morning we are continuing our worship series, *Stories that Matter*. For a long time people thought that humans made rational decisions and then created stories around those decisions. But now with the growing study of neuroscience, we have come to know that we humans actually tell ourselves stories first and that determines how we make decisions. Oftentimes this storymaking happens so quickly, that we don't even know we've done it unless we later reflect on what motivated our decisions and actions or train ourselves to recognize the stories we tell ourselves and stop in the moment to question whether they are true. In other words, the stories we tell ourselves shape our lives in ways we may not even realize.

In the book, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, Harold Clarke Goddard writes, “The destiny of the world is determined less by the battles that are lost and won than by the stories it loves and believes in.”

The stories we tell ourselves matter - the stories we tell ourselves lead us to battle or to peace; towards our neighbor or away; towards creativity, protection, and love or isolation, fear, and violence.

Governments have long known this. Advertisers know this. People of faith have long known this. Stories shape who we are and what we think is even possible. When I hear your story and you hear mine, we are changed.

This is why sharing our Biblical stories and other stories of wisdom is so vitally important. Our ancestors believed that these stories teach us something about God; about each other; about the world we live in; that the stories themselves are sacred. Which is why they're complicated and messy and don't often have moralistic taglines - because these stories are meant to be shared, with meaning and wisdom continuing to be revealed in them and in us.

Today's “story that matters” happens at night. And while this may seem like a funny detail, I do think it matters precisely because the information and the relationship that we seek at night is different than during the day. This is not a minor detail. The writer of the Gospel of John is the same author and storyteller, that gave us the words, “the light came into the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” The author of the Gospel of John uses light and dark metaphorically. And here in this story the night gives us a sense of mystery and of not knowing, and perhaps even a question of whether Nicodemus *wants* to be in the light with Jesus. I want you to think about the kinds of questions that are asked at night. When I think of nighttime conversations, I

think of talks around a campfire and night hikes; I think of the secrets shared among friends at slumber parties and hard conversations with family. I think of the questions that come up right before my kids go to bed and the way grief demands more of us at night. Conversations at night have a different weight to them. They convey a different kind of vulnerability.

And I do think Nicodemus comes to Jesus feeling vulnerable. All last week I wrestled with this conversation, wondering what it's really about, and then it hit me: we don't know why Nicodemus comes to talk to Jesus. He doesn't ask Jesus a question; he doesn't challenge him in any way; he doesn't say why he's come. The conversation is fully directed by Jesus. So either Jesus talks over Nicodemus, which is possible but out of character for him; or Nicodemus doesn't know how to ask his question or maybe he isn't sure he wants to ask it now that he's face to face with Jesus. So instead, Nicodemus starts with a statement: "Teacher, we know you come from God because of the amazing things you can do. God must be with you."

Is Nicodemus reassuring himself? Trying to talk himself into it? Or is he saying the opposite of what he means? It almost seems like a concession, doesn't it? "Teacher you must come from God, but..." The truth is, we don't know. But it's strange that he would go out of his way, in a time period where traveling at night is dangerous, to seek out Jesus unless there was a pretty good reason to do so. What gets you out of bed in the middle of the night? Or what keeps you up and then is so urgent you must leave your house to find the answer?

I think Nicodemus is either afraid; concerned; or has some deep questions about who Jesus is and what it means for him and for the faith that he holds dear. So while we don't know what Nicodemus wanted, other than that it seemed fairly urgent to him, we do know what Jesus offers Nicodemus; what Jesus thought Nicodemus needed:

First, Jesus tells Nicodemus that there's a lot more going on here than Nicodemus realizes. You say I'm from God? Of course I am, Jesus tells him. Anyone born from above can see God's Kingdom. Jesus seems to be hinting that he's not alone in this - that anyone born from above, or as it can be translated from the Greek, born anew, can see God's Kingdom. Nicodemus gets confused because he takes this literally, but it seems to me that Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to look around — as he has with so many before Nicodemus, and invites him to see that God's Kingdom is here.

Second, Jesus pushes at Nicodemus' rigidity a bit. Here, as people of faith, I think we need to pay close attention. Nicodemus is a religious leader; he has been brought up in the faith, the same faith as Jesus. Jesus is not in any way condemning Nicodemus' faith or how he interprets it. But I do think he may be pushing a little bit at the way religious people, and I'm including myself here, get stuck in thinking we know how

God works. So Jesus says to Nicodemus: the Spirit blows like the wind. You can't anticipate it; you can't keep it with you; you can't predict when it will show up. Today you say I'm from God, but just keep watching and you'll see that the Spirit is at work in lots of places and in lots of people where you least expect it.

And then Jesus says perhaps the most surprising thing of all - he pulls on a story that Nicodemus would've known well and says that the way God is choosing to love the world is by sending God's son. Like their great ancestor Abraham, whose faithfulness in God was shown when he was willing to give up his son Isaac, God is willing to offer all God has in Jesus, because, as Jesus says, God didn't come to condemn the world, but to love the world. God loves the world.

It's ironic and sad that this particular passage is used for judgment so often. Because in it, we see only grace. Jesus offers grace to Nicodemus to fill the hunger that brings him to Jesus in the first place. Jesus offers grace in telling him that we don't have to know or predict God's Spirit - God will move where God wants to! Jesus offers grace in this beautiful statement that unlike other gods that were known in his world, gods that sent thunderbolts and Caesars to do their bidding, this God loves the world. And nothing will stop that love- not even death.

This is the story we have to inform how we understand ourselves and the world. That in elements like the water of our baptism and bread and juice in communion, God comes to commune with us; God comes to bless us; God lives in us to be witnesses to God's Spirit in the world. So when you are up at night with the questions that haunt you, remember this: God loves you; God's Spirit is alive and on the loose in this world, bringing healing and light with it; and God calls us to keep our lives open to being witnesses of God's Kingdom. Let it be so.