

## **Sermon for March 11, 2018 – Nicodemus Moments**

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B – Text: John 3:1-17

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In today's reading, we once again meet Nicodemus, the curious Pharisee. And while the rich and familiar images of this story stand out, it's perhaps the setting by which Nicodemus comes to have this conversation with Jesus that really helps us to understand where we are going on this fourth Sunday in Lent. So, take a moment and put all the familiar words and famous bible verses out of your mind and picture the scene. It is the dead of night. Dim lamps burn here and there among stone walls and buildings. A lone figure, cloaked in darkness makes his way down deserted streets and alleys. The cicadas and crickets are chirping in the hot, dry night air. Finally, the lone figure finds who he is a looking for. Jesus appears in the darkness, standing among the trees and plants of a garden. Nicodemus pulls back his hood and looks around to be sure that no one else is lurking nearby. "Rabbi" he says, "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God..." The story comes to life when we can imagine the background of this conversation.

Nicodemus has come to Jesus at night to ask his questions. Nicodemus, a religious leader, needs the darkness to feel safe. He has much to lose in coming to Jesus; his standing in the community, his authority as a leader, his relationships with friends and neighbors. Yet, here Nicodemus is seeking out Jesus in the cover of darkness to ask honest and real questions of the Rabbi. Nicodemus wants to know who Jesus is, what He means for all the things that Nicodemus believes about God and religion. And curiously, Jesus begins by dodging Nicodemus' question. He's been asked these questions before. The scribes and Pharisees and temple priest love to probe Jesus. They love to put him on the spot and see if He can withstand the pressure. How's Jesus supposed to know what this guy's intentions are? Even at night, even with no crowds to rile up, Nicodemus is still a Pharisee. He is still part of a group that is suspicious of Jesus. So, Jesus answers vaguely about being born from above which prompts a follow up from Nicodemus. And Jesus goes on about being born of water and spirit, about the wind blowing where it chooses. But still Nicodemus wonders: "How can these things be?" Nicodemus and his questions are not unfamiliar to us. They're not the wonderings of children. Nor are they the questions of someone new to faith. Nicodemus has old questions. Questions that come from a life time of sitting in the pew week after week, month after month, year after year of hearing the bible stories. Nicodemus knows the doctrine and theology. Nicodemus doesn't need religion explained to him. Nicodemus needs the answers for his doubts. He wants to know if all of this is real and what it all means. He wants to know if Jesus is the real thing. Are the things Nicodemus has believed about God really true? Our Nicodemus moments come from the same place. They're questions we are too afraid to ask in the light, the doubts we're afraid to share publicly, the feelings of being silly for believing in a God that the world often laughs at.

There's a story I may have told before about something that happened the summer I did my chaplaincy at the Hershey Medical Center. I went to visit an 11-year-old Amish girl, Katie, who was nearing the end of her battle with leukemia. It was very late and most of the staff had gone home. The lights of the pediatric oncology ward had been dimmed so that the children could sleep easier. When I got to her room the girl's father was there. He asked me if I would pray which I did. That was the easy part. We stood there afterward in silence. After a few minutes the man asked to speak to me out in the hall. I was more than a bit apprehensive wondering what I might have done or said that was wrong. Nevertheless, we went into the hall. Once he'd closed the door behind him Katie's father asked me a question that I will never forget. He asked me if Jesus ever doubted. I was stunned by the question. I thought if anyone would have unshakeable faith in the face of death, it would be a member of the Amish community. What would I say to this man who, in my mind, had more than I ever could? I said a quick prayer, "Lord, help me to help this man." "Give me the right words to say." "Help me in some small way to ease his pain." Thankfully, God answered. My reply was simply this, "If you're referring to Jesus' words on the cross 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me' – then yes I believe that Jesus did doubt." I told him that everyone doubts at some point, that it's okay to doubt, that it's **human** to doubt especially when the unthinkable happens. I told him that God understands and loves us still. He told me that it was hard for him to express doubt. It wasn't something that his community spoke about very often. It was a Nicodemus moment. A moment for the deep questions of faith. A moment that we all come to know sooner or later. A moment when we wonder if Jesus the real thing or when we wonder if Jesus even remembers who we are. A moment when we realize that maybe there's more to following Jesus than we realized, that faithfulness might look different now than it used to. Notice though, in Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus, there's a moment where something curious happens. As Jesus first dodges Nicodemus' question with vague and confusing talk of being born from above and the Spirit doing as the Spirit wishes, he then asks a second follow-up question: "How can these things be?" And again, the question's not unlike questions often asked of Jesus by the religious authorities. But this time, Jesus seems taken aback. "Were not you – a religious leader – taught these things?" There must've been something in the way the question was asked that stopped Jesus in His tracks. There must've been something honest and searching, maybe even desperate, in the way Nicodemus asked it. So, Jesus does something amazing. He moves toward Nicodemus. Jesus drops the confusing speech that He normally saves for pesky religious leaders questioning Him in public and Jesus gives Nicodemus what he is looking for. Jesus gives the assurance that Nicodemus is seeking. Yes, Jesus says, the son of man is following in Moses' footsteps, and no, this is not an easy thing to accept or believe. Yet, Jesus says: "**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.**" Jesus gives Nicodemus the gospel in the clearest of terms. In just 27 words, Jesus sums up the gospel.

Martin Luther called this verse, "The gospel in miniature." This move towards Nicodemus is just a smaller version of what God's been doing all along from the very beginning to the entire human race! After calling the people to repentance and the people always fall back into the sin God decides to make the move. And so, God moves toward His people. That's who God is. It's what God does. God does so beginning with an announcement to a young virgin that she will bear a child.

And then with a voice thundering over the waters of baptism in the river Jordan. And then a dazzling transformation on a mountain top. And then just a few weeks ago, as the tempter tried to get Jesus to return to the old pattern of falling into sin, the movement of God became clear. God has moved toward creation, toward the people He has created and loved and called, and there's no going back. Jesus moves to Nicodemus giving him the assurance and the good news he needs to hear. And Jesus makes the same move towards us. Jesus assures us in our Nicodemus moments that He is indeed the real thing. He assures us that when we're worried about looking foolish in the eyes of the world He'll accept our foolishness without hesitation and He'll love us and forgive us regardless. Jesus assures us that when we're worried that this whole faith business may mean changes in our lives, in how we live, what we do, who we serve, and what we value, that He'll keep moving toward us making up the difference in our half-heartedness.

And here, brothers and sisters, is the thing. Nicodemus moments are something we cannot avoid. As people of faith we'll have our questions, we'll have our doubts, we'll have our fears, those things that we would only dare bring up in the darkness, those things that we'd just as soon keep hidden. But Nicodemus moments are also the moments when Jesus changes course and makes a move toward us. Jesus moves toward us in our darkness, in our confusion, in our hesitation and Jesus gives us what we need....good news. He gives us THE Good News!

Thanks be to God who so loved the world, who so loved US, that He gave His only Son!

Amen and amen.