

On the Road to Ukraine
John 3:1-17
Second Sunday in Lent
March 5, 2023
Deacon Nina Joygaard, Preaching

Our gospel reading today, begins with a Pharisee – that is an elite religious leader and teacher of Israel.¹ This Pharisee, named Nicodemus, pays Jesus a visit. Strangely enough, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. This is a **peculiar** detail for John to include. There are several reasons Nicodemus may have visited at night – perhaps it was a secret that he was talking to Jesus, he didn't want to be recognized by his peers or by Jesus' followers, he was too afraid to go in the light of day. Or perhaps the author uses the setting of night to symbolize that Nicodemus was outside of the light of Christ's followers and instead part of the world's darkness. Or it could represent unbelief or spiritual misunderstanding.² I certainly don't have an answer – I'm simply curious about the role night plays in this story and in our own faith exploration.

Whatever the motivation – I am inspired and encouraged by Nicodemus' openness and honest seeking of Jesus. He really does ask a LOT of questions. The back and forth between Jesus and Nicodemus is fascinating and reveals much about Jesus' purpose and God's kingdom.

About 4:30 am local time in Kyiv on the morning of February 24, 2022. Russian state television broadcast a speech from President Vladimir Putin "On conducting a special military operation" in Ukraine. Within minutes, explosions were heard in the darkness of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odessa and the Donbas.

¹ Vena.

² Osvaldo Vena, "Commentary on John 3:1-17" workingpreacher.org.

By 5 am, missiles and bomb attacks were launched against key targets across Ukraine. In the darkness of early morning, still 3 hours before sunrise, the Russian Aerospace Forces, Navy, and Ground Forces were involved in a coordinated attack to an unprepared and sleeping country.³

It has been 1 year. 1 week. And 2 days since that “special military operation” was launched. Ukraine and Russia continue to be at war. A great humanitarian and refugee crisis was unleashed in eastern Europe. Though the effects of the war in Ukraine reach far beyond Eastern Europe. In addition to economic instability, supply-chain issues and other factors, the conflict has exacerbated food shortages in already struggling regions such as the Horn of Africa.

One of our members, Deacon Steve Arnold, answered the call early in the conflict to use his teaching experience to help young people in Ukraine whose studies were disrupted. Deacon Steve has been doing English language learning with a group of students – who graciously joined Pastor John for a conversation to share with our congregation. We are **beyond blessed** to hear from some of them now...

A heartfelt and special thank you to Max, Melana, LayVen and Missy. Your honesty, courage, and grace in sharing with us is so appreciated. There is an extended version of this conversation, if you are interested, you can watch for it this week.

LayVen asked us “how has your life changed?” since these events have taken place? What an appropriate question for us to consider this day...

Some responses from our weekly Bible study participants included:

- more fearful of nuclear war.
- affected our economy and gas prices going up.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_conducting_a_special_military_operation

- Concern about whether its safe to travel to other western countries.

There were also some positive things –

- Ukraine has been a fixture of our prayers.
- Deacon Steve has been blessed by the opportunity to know these students.
- We are more in touch with specific refugee needs.

I would add that most of us can identify the Ukrainian flag – and we see it often. We are keenly aware of the needs of siblings of ours across the world. And while a conflict of this scale can make us feel powerless – we have not hidden ourselves away from the difficulties of this situation. As individuals and a congregation – we pray often for the people and leaders of Ukraine. We pray for the organizations providing relief, supplies, and support to refugees and those still in Ukraine. We have made financial contributions to our partners through Lutheran Disaster Response – which is on-the-ground working in 7 neighboring countries. And Deacon Steve’s students have requested another form of support from US – they have asked for recipes. So if you have a recipe that you’d be willing to share with this groups of Ukrainian students – please drop it off at the church office or email me (my email is listed in the bulletin).

Darkness to be used as a co-conspirator of evil. It can be used to wage attacks, hide, and live in secrecy. And the great injustice of war across the world affects even us here sitting in safety in the United States.

BUT darkness can also reveal truth, depth, and grace – as we find in this conversation between Nicodemus & Jesus. Asking questions – which really seems like such a small thing has made ALL the difference. Even in uncertainty and fear, Nicodemus’ small act created space for Jesus powerful answer. Jesus’ response has literally become a foundation of OUR Faith. Just imagine if Nicodemus had lost the nerve to visit Jesus. Where would Christianity be today? Nicodemus’ questions – spoken only in the cover of darkness –changed the world. Jesus’

answer is known the world over as John 3:16. *SLIDE* Those words speak life, give hope, and remind us that we are among those whom 'God so loves.'

If God can use Nicodemus' curiosity and search for understanding to irreversibly change the understanding of faith for millions across time and space – Surely, God can use our small acts to make a difference to someone across the world...

Perhaps you are part of those who teach and mentor. Donate funds to refugee and humanitarian organizations. Open up a conversation about the plight of refugees fleeing their homes out of fear and violence. Respond to a simple request for recipes from Deacon Steve's students. Or pray for mercy, peace, safety, and comfort for those enduring incredible circumstances.

May we, like Nicodemus before us, ask hard questions. Do the small things. Follow the Spirit – that God might use **even us** and our small acts of seeking you to shine brightly. To show love. To be welcome in the world God made. In the name of God's only Son, we pray. Amen.