

Seeking Christ in the Dark

Meditation on John 3:1-17 (18-21)

March 12, 2017

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 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?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 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. 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? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ "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. 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. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Seventy-five years ago this month Japanese Americans living on the West Coast began being "relocated" to internment camps. About 120,000 people were forced to leave their homes, schools, jobs and

businesses shortly after President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on Feb. 19, 1942--two months after Japanese troops attacked Pearl Harbor. The order authorized the War Department to create military areas from which any and all Americans might be excluded, and to provide for the “necessary transport, lodging, and feeding of persons displaced from such areas.”

Those of Japanese ancestry living in California, Oregon, Washington and Arizona, were gathered into trains, trucks, and automobiles and taken to 10 internment camps. Most of those deported to these military-style camps for the duration of the war were American citizens.

I find the most upsetting photos from this time are those of the children. Some are pictured sitting with suitcases and bedrolls, wearing what looks like luggage tags on their clothing. I wonder what the photographers were they thinking when they looked through the camera lens? I wonder what led our country to this extreme measure? Racism has been blamed. But mostly I think it was fear.

I didn't learn about the internment of Japanese Americans when I was in grade school. That dark secret was left out of our textbooks. The topic was barely mentioned in U.S. History when I was in college in the 1980s, even though it was a contemporary issue by then. In 1980, President Carter opened an investigation to “determine whether the decision to put Japanese Americans into internment camps had been justified by the government.” The investigation concluded that there was no evidence of Japanese Americans' disloyalty. President Reagan, the year I graduated from college, signed into law the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, apologizing for the internment on behalf on the U.S. government and

authorizing payment of \$20,000 to each camp survivor—or their heirs. For many internment camp survivors had, by then, passed away.

The last of the work camps closed in March 1946—4 years after the executive order was signed. Some families lived in those camps 4 years! When they were released, they didn't have homes, jobs, money or businesses to return to.

A small, blurry photo of a Caucasian man smiling and shaking hands goodbye to his Japanese American neighbor moves me to question, “Why didn't he--why didn't we--speak up for the voiceless?” We were afraid.

We chose what was easy--to say and do nothing-- rather than what was right.

Today's gospel tells of another dark time in history—when the Son of God came to bring light to a world darkened by evil and sin. Nicodemus' coming at night symbolizes his own spiritual ignorance and his desire not to be seen by others, despite his protest that he and others know that Jesus is “a teacher who has come from God.” He isn't ready to be seen talking with the one who, just a little while before, was “cleansing the Temple”-- overturning tables, pouring out the coins, cracking a whip and driving out all the cattle and sheep and the moneychangers, who were turning the Father's house into a “marketplace.”

Nicodemus has endured Christian criticism over the centuries. John Calvin, in the 16th century, was scornful of those who sympathized with

the movement for reform of the church but would not publicly be identified with it. He called them “Nicodemites.” Scholars today sometimes infer a rude tone in Nicodemus’ line of questioning in this passage, saying he is sarcastic when he asks in v. 4 how someone can be reborn—re-enter a mother’s womb-- when they have grown old? But I don’t think a man, a respected teacher and leader, who would get up in the middle of the night to go and see Jesus in secret would be sarcastic. I think he really wants to know what Jesus means by this talk of being “born from above,” possibly even to distinguish this spiritual rebirth from reincarnation, a central tenet of Buddhism and Hinduism, ancient religions that predate Christianity.

Jesus speaks in vs. 3 and 5 of seeing and entering the kingdom of God—something only possible by the grace of God and the empowerment of the Spirit; it is the Lord who chooses us! Jesus uses the same word when he talks about the “Spirit” and the “wind.” The Greek word for Spirit or wind is *pneuma*, just as the Hebrew *ruach* in Genesis means Spirit, wind or breath. “The wind blows where IT chooses,” Jesus says of the Spirit. “You hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.”

I also don’t think Jesus is being sarcastic or rude, either, when he asks in 3:10, “Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” I think he is teaching, as he often does, about the wisdom of this world--versus the wisdom of God! The apostle Paul will later say in 1 Cor. 2:14-15, “the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for **they are foolishness to him**; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

“Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus says in John 3:11, “we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 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?”

Jesus illumines for Nicodemus God’s plan for redemption. The reference to Moses comes from Numbers 21:9, when Israel wandered through the wilderness and was totally reliant on God for their daily survival. “So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.” Jesus connects Israel’s salvation to the new covenant that will be opened to all—when the Son of Man will be “lifted up” (foreshadowing Jesus’s death on a cross, his resurrection and ascension).

Jesus comforts us--and Nicodemus --with assurances of God’s love and grace in 3:16-17. God is not exclusive in His love for certain people that **we** may decide to dislike. God’s love is for **ALL**. God “did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world may be saved through him.” It is true that not everyone will receive this message, Jesus tells Nicodemus. He is warning him of things to come and challenging Nicodemus, perhaps drawn to Christ by the Spirit, to make good choices--“do what is true.” What is right!

“The light has come into the world,” Jesus says, “and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.” But those who “do what is true,” he says in 3:21, “come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Nicodemus disappears abruptly from the text after his incredulous question in v. 9, “How can these things be?” We are left to ponder what his response will be. He will reappear briefly at Jesus’ interrogation in ch. 7 and then at the cross, with Joseph of Arimathea, another secret disciple of Jesus--for fear of the Jews. Nicodemus will anoint Christ’s body with an extraordinary amount of spices and oil--100 pounds, Scripture says! They will wrap Christ’s body with cloth and lay him in a garden tomb.

Nicodemus’ journey of faith may stir us to consider our own stories--times when we were faithful and times when we relied on ourselves, and stumbled and fell. We are all sinners, redeemed by grace! We are left to our own response to Christ’s assurance of God’s love for the world. And the invitation for us all to “come to the light” so that others may see our good deeds done in God--and be saved.

In these 40 days of loving service, drawing ever nearer to Christ, let us come to our Savior with our darkness--confessing our sin and doubt. May the Spirit from above that has chosen us to believe on Christ and receive eternal life grant us a vision of God’s just and peaceful kingdom. May the same Spirit dispel our fears and empower and unite us to do not what is easy--to say and do nothing--but what is right.

Let us pray.

Holy One, we thank you for your love for the world and the gift of your Son, forgiveness of all our sins, and the promise of everlasting life with you. Forgive us for not wishing to admit our mistakes and reveal our

weaknesses, even to you. Humble us. Forgive us for our pride. Forgive us for choosing to say and do nothing. Thank you for catching us when we stumble and start to fall, holding us firmly in your loving hand. Grant us a vision for your just and peaceful kingdom. Teach us to walk in your ways. In Christ we pray. Amen.