

012217 Epiphany! Series: "The God Who Is Patient With Me"
John 3:1-12

We're talking this month about *epiphanies*. An epiphany is a revelation, or an insight. It's when your mind suddenly grabs hold of something. Last week, we talked about Nathanael, a man who had an abrupt epiphany. Bam! He realized, in a burst of understanding, that Jesus, the man from Nazareth, was not just a man. He was truly God. Jesus is the God who knows me, Nathanael marveled.

Today we're talking about Nicodemus, a man who didn't have a sudden epiphany. Nicodemus' epiphany was a super slow-motion epiphany. Like Nathanael, Nicodemus came to realize that Jesus was God; but it took him a long, long time to get it. Nicodemus' story teaches us that Jesus is the God who's patient with us.

Who was this guy, Nicodemus? Verse 1 tells us. He was "a man of the Pharisees ... a ruler of the Jews." So Nicodemus was a Bible expert, a teacher of the Jewish Law. And he was a member of the ruling council of the entire Jewish nation. Nicodemus was a big deal.

He hears about Jesus. He's intrigued, especially, by the miracles Jesus is doing. Water into wine. Healing the sick. Curing the lame. Nicodemus knows that no one could do these things unless God's power is at work in him. So Nicodemus is eager to meet this miracle man. But he's cautious. Jesus isn't part of the religious establishment, and Nicodemus isn't sure he should be associating openly with him. So he sneaks off at night, when no one can see him, to meet with Jesus. And they have a fascinating conversation.

What would you and Jesus talk about, if you had some one-on-one time with him? Would you tell him how much you

love him? How deep your faith is? Tell him all the great things you're doing as a disciple in his name? Or would you, maybe, be honest about your doubts? Your questions? Your spiritual uncertainties?

We read, in the Gospel Lesson, the dialog Nicodemus and Jesus had. Nicodemus is aware that there's something special about Jesus, something godly; but he's not quite ready to see him as God. Jesus is aware of Nicodemus' hesitancy, so he's nudging and poking at the Pharisee's belief system. He challenges Nicodemus to think outside his religious box; but he's not demanding instant conversion or total allegiance from him yet.

There are great theology topics covered in their discussion: the concept of being "born again;" the work of the Holy Spirit; the nature of the kingdom of God. But what I really love about their conversation is how patient Jesus is with Nicodemus. Jesus knows that Nicodemus is on a journey, a spiritual journey. And the Lord is willing to meet Nicodemus where he's at, and to walk with him on his journey.

The conversation ends with Nicodemus still not sure what to believe. His last words are (verse 9), "How can these things be?" He's not had that epiphany quite yet, has he?

And, yet, a year or two later, when the Pharisees are trying to decide if Jesus should be arrested, Nicodemus stands up for Jesus. In John 7, we read, "Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, 'Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?'"

Then, we read in John 19 about how it was Nicodemus, after Jesus had died on the cross for the world's sins, who came

with Joseph of Arimathea, a follower of Jesus, to take the Lord's body and prepare it for burial.

Had Nicodemus fully accepted Jesus as the Son of God, when he laid Jesus' body in the grave? Was his epiphany finally complete? There's a lot we don't know about our friend Nicodemus. But we do know that Jesus is the God who was patient with him. And I am so glad that Jesus is the God who is patient with me, and with you.

Do you know someone like Nicodemus? Maybe you're a little bit like him yourself. Drawn to Jesus, but filled with questions. Believe something about Jesus, but still trying to figure him out. Grew up hearing a lot about Jesus, but not sure where he fits in your life today. My guess is that there are a whole bunch of Nicodemuses here in church today.

The good news for all of us? Jesus is the God who is patient with us. He meets us where we're at on our spiritual journey. Jesus doesn't demand that you get a 100% score on your theology test first. He doesn't wait until you've cleaned up your act to want to hang out with you. He welcomes you now. He knows you, and he's eager for you to come to know him more, starting right now, starting right where you're at. Jesus doesn't say, "Sinners, when you fix all of your spiritual problems, then I'll share my grace with you." Instead, he shares his grace with us freely, abundantly, knowing we need it for our journey. So patiently, Jesus walks with us, step by step -- helping, blessing, forgiving, strengthening, understanding.

What a comfort that is, for Christians like us! Jesus is the God who is patient with us. He knew that it wasn't easy for Nicodemus to step away from his training, his conditioning, and a lifetime of thinking about God in a certain way. It took Nicodemus a long time before he had the epiphany that

Jesus really is God, before he figured out what that meant for his life.

And Jesus understands how hard it can be for us modern-day Nicodemuses to change the way we think, to go against our cultural norms, to swim upstream, and to truly put Jesus first in our lives, to treat him as the God he is. He knows you. He's patient with you. And he always willing to walk with you, and help you on your journey as a Christian.

Whether your epiphany is swift and sudden, or super slow-motion, may you experience every day the joy of knowing Jesus. He is the God who is patient with you. Amen.