

“Come to the Light”

A Sermon for Lake Shore Baptist Church
Preached by Claire Helton on March 11, 2018

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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.

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. 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. 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. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 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.

This is the gospel of grace.

Thanks be to God.

There was a hiss as the lantern flared to life, and Nicodemus took his first few tentative steps into the street, quickly turning the corner to avoid being seen by his nosy neighbors. He was on a mission and didn't need the interruption. He had heard enough traveling preachers to know there was something different about Jesus. As a part of the religious establishment it was his job to keep up with developments like this, to keep tabs on them, make sure things weren't getting too out of hand – but not to become involved. The people could follow whomever they liked as long as it didn't escalate to the point where the Romans would step in. That's when his superiors would really lay down the law, but he was hoping with Jesus it wouldn't come to that. Somehow, this one seemed different. This one seemed to have something to say worth saying.

It wasn't that Nicodemus was afraid of being seen talking with Jesus, but he didn't like the image it would give off, the shadow it might cast over his impeccable reputation within the community. So he waited until after sundown to begin his quest. Clouds dimmed the moonlight as he navigated the dark streets, making his way toward an audience with the Light of the World. As they talked, Jesus' words caused Nicodemus to rethink everything he thought he knew about the way God worked. He talked about being born again, born from above, as if that made any sense. He referenced the old story of Moses in the wilderness, lifting up a serpent so that those who needed healing could look on it and live. It was a strange story, and stranger still was that Jesus somehow seemed to think he was like the serpent.

“Imagine,” Jesus said, “that instead of the serpent, it’s me being lifted up, and those who look on me – my life, my death, and all that comes after – aren’t just being restored to physical health but to life itself, really real life, eternal life. For God so loves this world that I wound up here, doing what I’m doing, so that whoever has eyes to see and believes will know what that eternal life looks like, smells like, tastes like. Of course there will be those who won’t want to look. They may lay eyes on me, but they won’t really see. Some people are so comfortable operating in darkness that they scurry away like cockroaches when the light shines their way. But those who live in truth are drawn to the light.”

Nicodemus walked away that night knowing two things deep in his bones: Jesus did have something to say worth saying. And if he kept saying it, it was probably going to get him killed.

We often paint Nicodemus as a reluctant disciple, because he goes to Jesus at night, but I do wonder sometimes if it was just a scheduling issue. You know how we like to read ourselves into the biblical stories? Well, I keep thinking maybe Nicodemus just had young children – because this feels familiar. Between getting work done during the day and attempting to be present with my boys in the evening straight through dinner, bath-time, and bedtime, I know that any amount of time I want to devote to spiritual growth is going to have to happen in the dark hours of the evening after they’ve gone to bed, or in the dark hours of the morning before they wake. So in the most literal sense, I can relate to Nicodemus, seeking Jesus in the dark.

But knowing the gospel of John, there’s probably something more to the timing of Nicodemus’ visit than a busy schedule. The author of John’s gospel has been using light and dark images since paragraph one, so when Jesus starts talking light and darkness on the heels of such an important and familiar passage as “God so loved the world,” *and* the narrator has already gone out of his way to mention that this encounter takes place at night, it’s worth paying attention to how these images are at play. Nicodemus was aware that in the world he lived in, a world of religiously charged politics – or was it politically charged religion? – listening to Jesus and

actually doing what he said was sure to get him in trouble. So it's understandable that he wanted to fly under the radar as much as possible.

Nicodemus came to Jesus with lots of questions. But I wonder if he didn't walk away from this exchange with a new question weighing on his mind as he wound his way through the dark streets back home: Jesus had said those who believed would know eternal life. Believed what? Believed how?

When it comes to belief we are prone, as children of the Enlightenment, to stress intellectual assent. Challenging this paradigm in a conversation about the difficulty people have with the mystery of resurrection, philosopher Peter Rollins has famously said that he unequivocally and unabashedly denies the resurrection. He denies it every time he does not feed the hungry, or clothe the naked, or share what he has with the poor. And by the inverse, he affirms the resurrection every time that he does. The implication is that our intellectual assent to a doctrine or a creed is no belief at all if it does not sink down deep past our minds into body and soul. When the gospel says "whosoever believes in him" we have to expand our concept of belief into something that encompasses not just brainwaves but joints, marrow, and muscle, causing our feet to walk with and toward the oppressed, causing our arms to embrace and serve our brothers and sisters in need.

I imagine Nicodemus found that when he spoke with Jesus, the way forward became clear. That's what happens when light illuminates your path. Jesus made no secret of what the way forward for a true believer looks like – it's in John's gospel that he tells us, "I am the way," and if we take that seriously we'll pay attention to what it looked like to be Jesus. It looked like standing with and standing up for the oppressed. It looked like feeding the hungry. It looked like challenging the loudest and most powerful religious and political voices of his day. We may not like what we see when the light illuminates the way forward, but that light is shining in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it. So we're faced with a choice. Which will it be?

A soft breeze swept through the meeting room, stirring Nicodemus' robe and drawing him back into the Sanhedrin's proceedings. He had been staring out the window, lost in thought, replaying the conversation he'd had with Jesus over and over again in his mind, as he had done for weeks now. He felt a challenge, felt that Jesus was inviting him into something much bigger and brighter than the life he had been leading, but it was so much easier to remain in the dark. The days were getting shorter as the Festival of Booths began, and the crowded streets were filled with pilgrims and the merchants who wanted their business, as well as plenty of street preachers who had to shout to be heard. It was the last day of the festival, the great day, and as Nicodemus tuned back in he noticed the temple police filing in, ready to give their report to the council of Pharisees.

Apparently Jesus had been among the company of street preachers, teaching on the steps of the temple. "Why didn't you arrest him?!" the Pharisees demanded. The police shuffled their feet, their minds confused and their loyalties divided. It seemed at least a few of them had been taken by his message of grace and life. The Pharisees reacted in fear. They lashed out, "Surely he hasn't deceived you, too! You're throwing your lot in with the ignorant masses over us? What do they know of God?" They threw up their hands in exasperation, but Nicodemus sat silent and still. He stared at his feet just a moment longer before deciding to take a risk, just to inch a little further into the light. "This..." he started, "this isn't who we are, is it? Judging people before they have a chance to speak for themselves? I wasn't under the impression that was our way." The rest of the council dismissed him with a few snickers. "What, are you from Galilee too?" they taunted, looking down their noses.

That night, Nicodemus reflected on what had happened as he walked the streets, trying to clear his head. The sun had gone down, which meant the noise around the temple was only growing as the culmination of the feast approached: the illumination ceremony. As the huge menorahs in the temple were lit, the light they cast danced and flickered, shining out over the city at night and reminding the people of God's presence among them both now and in the wilderness so long ago, as the fiery pillar guided them through the darkness. As he neared the temple once more, taking in the sights of the fire-lit celebration, Nicodemus noticed a crowd gathering, with Jesus at its center. He kept his distance, but as he found a place to linger within earshot, he couldn't seem to escape the light of the blazing menorahs. As they burned on, he heard Jesus

announce, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Suddenly, Nicodemus wasn’t sure he had ever walked in anything but darkness, but in speaking his mind before the Sanhedrin he felt that perhaps he had taken a first, tentative step toward whatever this light might be.

I have always loved the Bible stories about Peter, which you might have guessed given that’s what we just named our second child. Peter is bold. He makes larger-than-life mistakes and receives larger-than-life grace in response. I envy his willingness to take risks. But Peter’s story is not my story. Mine is much more like that of Nicodemus. I am a quiet disciple; I don’t like to make waves; and it matters far too much to me what the rest of the community thinks. What I see in Nicodemus’ story, though, is a kind of stubborn faithfulness that almost wins him more of my respect than Peter’s louder displays of faith; his is the kind of faith that survives like the single burning ember in a smoldering heap of ashes, the one that won’t quite go out, that persists and requires that you attend to it now and again, until the day comes when you can breathe enough life into it that the flame is ignited once more. Nicodemus inches his way toward the light, while Peter progresses in leaps and bounds, and I don’t know that Nicodemus is worse for it. At least I know how he feels, how I sometimes have to just keep inching my way into the light, to keep from stalling out.

Shaking with anger – or was it fear? – Nicodemus looked on as the swarming crowds jeered. Things had turned out to be worse than even he could have predicted. He had come to expect that Jesus would be arrested, had even anticipated he would be flogged to make an example of him, but it all happened so quickly and before he knew it, what had begun as an investigation of blasphemy turned into a vindictive, one-sided trial with a predetermined outcome. Jesus had been handed over to the Romans and crucified – and for what? Was this where the path of light and life led? On that darkest day, the sun seemed to go down at noon, all the light had gone out of things, and those who had followed Jesus found themselves stumbling, feeling their way in

the dark – confused, broken, and lost. Even the twelve were nowhere to be seen, so scared were they for their lives now that the worst had actually come to pass.

But something in Nicodemus, who first came to Jesus at night, was familiar with this darkness. The confusion and chaos were old friends of his, and so with perhaps more clarity than even those closest to Jesus could muster on that dark day, two unlikely disciples – Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea – set out to give a proper burial to the body of the one they had longed to follow. Nicodemus may have lurked in the shadows, but he had stayed on the journey with Jesus all the way to the cross, and when Good Friday came and the twelve had scurried back into the darkness to hide, Nicodemus was the one left standing in the light of day, inching faithfully along, even when it seemed the Light itself had gone out. As the sun sank deeper and deeper into the horizon, Nicodemus and Joseph made their way toward the tomb, hoping to finish the burial before the Sabbath began. As he wrapped the body with spices in linen cloths, something in Nicodemus cracked. And how he wept. And with each tear that fell, the crack grew wider, and eventually broke wide open, as the light came pouring through.

The Light of the World is beckoning us to walk in his way. For God loved the world so much that the Light took on flesh, that whoever believes in the light enough to embody it would begin to know what real life can be.

So come. Come to the light. Come and believe.

Amen.