

The Hungry Spirit: Chosen

Genesis 17:1-8; John 3:1-17

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Jesus, Nicodemus, and the cover of darkness. It is one of the great stories from John's Gospel, one, I understand, that was a favorite of African-American slaves. The slaves read this story of Nicodemus' visit to Jesus at nighttime, and it gave them courage to seek and find Jesus under the cover of darkness. Some slaves were told by their masters that slaves were not fully human and that they, therefore, had no soul. Participation in Christian worship, they were told, was a waste of their time. Other slaves were allowed to attend worship at the master's church, in the balcony, at the master's discretion. Most slaves were not permitted to hold their own worship services, and since most were illiterate, they could not read the Bible. So, like Nicodemus, they went to Jesus under the cover of darkness. They risked their safety and the safety of their family members by holding secret, nighttime worship services where they embraced a powerful message of hope, that in Jesus Christ all men and women are set free, all are chosen to be the people of God.

Have you ever considered what it would be like to be the *not* chosen? If you're Abraham in Genesis 17, and you and your descendents are the ones promised the new land, the land flowing with milk and honey, and you are given the promise that God will be your protector, then you are most blessed indeed. But what if you're neither Abraham nor the descendent of Abraham? What if you belong to that enormous pool of human beings that was "not chosen?" Perhaps it was like being a slave. Imagine the gradual awareness that must have come upon a slave, that awareness that you are a slave and that you will always be a slave and that your children and grandchildren will be slaves too. Surely an infant would not be aware of that distinction, perhaps not even a small child. Imagine going through adolescence, though, and becoming aware that some people get to be masters and live in the big house and enjoy the good things in life, while others have to be slaves and live in squalor and see their descendents trapped in this role of the not chosen. And it was all a matter of chance, the human family into which you happened to be born.

It would be terrible to be the not chosen.

That is one of the things confronted in this story about Jesus, Nicodemus, the darkness, and that other character in this story, God, the hidden character who was introducing something new in the life and ministry of Jesus. The life of faith, God was saying in Christ, is not about one's bloodline or heritage, where some are chosen and some not. It is not about the human family into which you happened to be born, something over which you have no control. In the ministry of Jesus, God was announcing to the world a new way of understanding chosenness. "From now on," God was saying, "no more slaves! From now on, no more not chosen, because I choose every human being to be my daughter or son." In Christ, everyone was and is invited to be engaged with God, the Creator of heaven and earth. Jesus said to Nicodemus that, regardless of where we were born or to whom, in the big house or the slave house, we all must be born "from above." You can begin to understand why this story was a favorite among the slaves, and why their masters tried to restrict their access to it.

John says that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a title that has negative connotations in church life today. However, that was not the case in Jesus' day. The Pharisees were highly respected and educated religious leaders. We also know that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the official Jewish court. He was a respected community leader and a theologian, perhaps comparable to a divinity school dean or a seminary professor today. John says that Nicodemus went to visit Jesus, the new guy in town, the upstart, more like the seminary student. And notice that John says that Nicodemus went to see Jesus "by night." Why? I'm convinced that this is important to this story. Was Nicodemus disingenuous? Was he embarrassed to be seen with Jesus? John frequently employs the use of the double entendre, where words or phrases have a double meaning. Is it possible that John was saying here that Nicodemus' visit was not just at nighttime, but that Nicodemus went to Jesus *in darkness*, meaning spiritual darkness? While the "seminary professor" had all the proper theological credentials, a Pharisee, a leader of the community, a teacher, John was saying that he nevertheless was in spiritual darkness in his engagement with God.

It certainly happens, doesn't it? The way we wear our religion on the outside is not always a true reflection of what is happening on the inside.

Sometimes those who are chosen take the big house for granted, maybe even lust after a bigger big house. And sometimes we who are chosen become so busy tending to the big house that we neglect the One who gave it to us. It is a tendency in the life of faith to take chosenness for granted.

Notice that Nicodemus treated Jesus with respect. He was not condescending at all. He addressed Jesus as “rabbi,” which means teacher. He acknowledged that the “signs” Jesus performed were “from God.” In fact, Nicodemus said, “*We* (plural pronoun) know that you are a teacher who has come from God....” It is a compliment, but it is more than that. Who was the “we”? Was Nicodemus representing some group? Perhaps the Sanhedrin or other Pharisees? I think so. Nicodemus represented a larger constituency that night.

The plot thickens, but just wait!

Jesus responded to Nicodemus’ gracious confrontation by telling Nicodemus those words that Jimmy Carter made famous. “You must be born again,” he said, or “born from above.” Like many people today, Nicodemus was confused by this terminology. He just could not understand how someone could re-enter his mother’s womb and be born a second time. So Jesus said it again, but the second time Jesus added something new and significant, something you would not notice if you’re reading this story in English. The second time Jesus used the plural pronoun “you.” In the south, we would translate verse seven this way, “Y’all need to be born from above.” Not just Nicodemus, but Nicodemus and some others, maybe those who sent him. You *all* need to be born from above, Jesus was saying, the entire faculty of the seminary.

Jesus then went on to say that God is like the wind. The wind blows where it will. It does not ask permission. We may hear it and feel it, but we do not control it. It may blow east and then south and then east again. The one sure thing about the wind is this: it will blow. And so it is with God, Jesus was saying. God does not ask our permission when God does a new thing. The only question for us is, “Will we go with the blowing wind, or will we brace ourselves and fight against it?”

Jesus or John then told Nicodemus the most wonderful news. John 3:16, 17 may or may not be in red lettering in your translation. If these verses are in red lettering, that means that the translators believe these words

were spoken by Jesus. If they are not in red or in quotation marks, that means that the translators believe these verses are John's commentary on what Jesus has just said. There is no way to know for sure which is correct, since they didn't use quotation marks in koine' Greek. In my opinion it makes little difference when you really hear this good news:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that **everyone** who believes in him may not perish but 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.*

Chosen. That's what this story is about. We've all been chosen, everyone, the entire world. We've been chosen by God. This story is not about having the right credentials or living in the big house. It is an invitation to be honest about our darkness, our nighttime, and to return our hungry hearts to God. That is the good news of this story—for slaves and masters alike. That is why we make this Lenten journey. We use this time to back away and look at the big picture of our lives. This is a time for raw honesty. The wind is blowing. Hear it. Feel it.

By the way, when the gospel of John ends, guess who was present among the faithful to help prepare Jesus' body for burial? Nicodemus, who had moved out of darkness.

Closing Prayer

Most gracious God, creator of heaven and earth, touch our hungry hearts. Find us in the darkness and restore us to usefulness for your Kingdom's sake. Amen.