

*Finding Our Way Again:  
Out of the Darkness*  
Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17

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The First Sunday of Lent  
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The prophet Joel set the stage for us this past Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of the Lenten season. He pleaded for someone to issue a warning. Someone blow the trumpet, he begged. Anyone sound the alarm on Mt. Zion. Everyone get the word out that the day of the Lord is coming, and it is going to be terrible. Joel believed that the day of the Lord would not be a day of rejoicing. The day that most believed would be their day of salvation would instead be their day of destruction, devastation, and misery. Joel was convinced that God would unleash unrelenting judgment upon the people of Israel. So he tried to warn the people, believing that they had one last hope. They had to find their way again, as a people, as the people of God. With fasting, with weeping, with mourning, with hearts torn open to God, Joel believed they had to find their way again. So he urged them,

*Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
sanctify a fast;  
call a solemn assembly;  
gather the people.  
Sanctify the congregation;  
assemble the aged;  
gather the children,  
even infants at the breast.  
Let the bridegroom leave his room,  
and the bride her canopy.*  
(Joel 2:15-16)

An alarm is going off in our text from the Gospel of John, too; we just can't hear it. It's not a trumpet. It doesn't issue from the pinnacle of Mt. Zion. No, it's that quiet voice that issues from our hearts, that unsettling voice that challenges our conscience, that will not let us go until we either deny its existence or listen and respond. The story of Nicodemus is a

beautiful account of a respected theologian who found the truth, a wise man who found wisdom, a man of faith who found his way out of darkness.

To understand this story fully, we have to understand how John uses language. The Gospel of John is filled with symbolism and metaphor. For example, in the previous chapter, Jesus goes to a wedding in Cana of Galilee. You remember the story. It's a great party, but the host runs out of wine, bringing the party to a halt. The joy ended. The celebration ended. But Jesus rescues the host by changing water into wine. Now, that story really is not about a wedding or marriage or water or wine. It is about God who was bringing joy and celebration to the bone-dry party called life. The Word had become flesh and dwelt among us. That's how we must read the Gospel of John.

So when John says that Nicodemus came to Jesus "by night," we need to see a flag waving. John doesn't mean simply "after the sun went down." John is describing darkness, a lack of understanding; we could call it spiritual darkness. John is telling us that Nicodemus came to Jesus in darkness. Yes, he was a Pharisee, which meant that he belonged to the most deeply religious order in Judaism. Yes, he was a ruler of the Jews, which likely meant that he sat on the Sanhedrin, their supreme judicial body entrusted with the spiritual and moral leadership of the nation. And yes, he was a teacher of Israel, meaning that he was a trained theologian. Yet John is telling us that Nicodemus was in darkness when he sought Jesus that fateful night. He may have had all the religious credentials, but an alarm was sounding within him, a voice calling him deeper, calling him out of darkness. This story is about how Nicodemus found his way again.

Look at how his story begins. With certitude. Certainty. Complete confidence. Nicodemus approached Jesus under the cover of darkness and said, "Rabbi, we *know*...." The plural pronoun "we" probably refers to himself and the others on the Sanhedrin, their high court. It appears that Nicodemus was an official representative of the Sanhedrin that night, sent to question Jesus. He wanted Jesus to know at the beginning how certain he and his colleagues were. They knew. They didn't think or speculate or suppose. "Rabbi, we know...."

Isn't that how most of our journeys began? I tell people sometimes that my own theology was far more certain before I went to seminary. It was even more certain before I went to college. If you had known me when

I was in high school, I could have answered all of your thorny theological and ethical questions, you know, the ones I cannot answer. I had all the answers back then! Isn't it ironic that when we felt the most certain it was actually the darkest? We just didn't know it. When we had God all figured out, neatly packaged, explained in four easy steps, we didn't know it, but we were in darkness. We didn't know how much we didn't know.

Many of us owe a great debt to those who patiently, lovingly, and graciously helped us grow up. For me, it was some godly, scholarly professors in college and seminary. They helped me realize that I didn't really have God all figured out, that God is far bigger and greater than anything my little mind ever could figure out. I finally discovered that theology is a study in humility because the more we learn of God the more we realize what we don't know. It's like approaching an unwashed window. We say, "I *know* what that is. It is a window, a piece of plate glass, and it surely is dirty." But if we scrape away a little dirt, we see a tree on the other side. If we wipe away a little more dirt, we see roses and flowers and a redbird. If we clean the window, we don't see a window at all. We see that a lush garden, a world, awaits us on the other side, beckoning us to come out and enjoy. We begin saying, "We *know*...." Only to discover that there is far more than we ever dreamed.

Nicodemus' journey began with certitude: "Rabbi, we know...." But he was willing to engage Jesus in give-and-take. You must be born anew, Jesus told him. Well, not exactly. The Greek text here is plural. What Jesus really said is, "Y'all must be born anew," meaning Nicodemus and those whom he represented. They engage in debate, Nicodemus asking how that can happen. How can an adult re-enter the womb and be born a second time? Jesus clarifies. You must be born of water, meaning a natural, physical birth since we are brought into this world in a sack of amniotic fluid. But you also must be born of Spirit, he says. They debate. It is a healthy exchange of ideas.

That saved many of us, didn't it? We engaged in a conversation. About life. About God. About truth. For some of us, that was rather scary. It was for me. When I began to question, doubt, some of my notions of God, church, truth, that was a frightening undertaking. My parents and grandparents had given me those beliefs. The youth workers in my church had given them to me. My pastor. And some of them told me, "Don't doubt. Don't go off to school and allow those professors to steal your faith."

Could all those people be wrong? Could my tradition be wrong? It took some people I trusted saying, “David, it’s okay. Engage. Question. Doubt. Struggle. Make it your own. Because there’s nothing to fear from the truth.” I needed permission from someone I trusted.

One of my responsibilities as your pastor is to say to you, “It’s okay. You engage. Question. Doubt, even what I tell you. You make it your own.” They were right. There is nothing to fear from the truth. We all must let our faith grow up. We do that by joining the conversation. Engaging Jesus. Engaging the whole of scripture. Engaging serious theologians. Sitting in groups and talking about what really think and really feel.

Nicodemus, who was in darkness, had the courage to engage Jesus. This began a journey that brought him out of darkness. We see Nicodemus only two more times in the Gospel of John. The first of these two is in chapter seven. It was the last day of one of the Jew’s great festivals, the feast of Tabernacles. There was a debate among the people as to whether Jesus was the Christ, the long awaited Messiah. Many believed he was. The Pharisees heard this conversation and sent the temple police to arrest Jesus. But there was a problem. Some of the temple police believed Jesus, and they returned without arresting him. The Pharisees were angered. Remember, Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He was present that day and defended Jesus. He stood against his colleagues.

The last time we see Nicodemus is immediately after the crucifixion. Joseph of Arimathea asked permission to take the body of Jesus. He would bury Jesus in his own tomb. Now, listen to what John tells us here:

*Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths.... Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so...they laid Jesus there.*

Nicodemus helped bury the body of our crucified Lord. He began in darkness and ended in the light. That’s what John is telling us. Nicodemus came to Jesus in darkness, full of certitude, certain that he had this God thing

all figured out. But he was open, willing to engage, debate, grow. And he did. From the darkness into the light. Nicodemus found his way.

And so we are challenged. We each have an internal alarm, that quiet voice that issues from our hearts challenging our conscience. Calling us deeper. Calling us out of the darkness. Challenging us to wipe a bit of dirt from that window, so that we may see the beauty and wonder that await on the other side. The alarm is sounding. I can hear it. What will you do? Deny it? Or listen and respond?

### Closing Prayer

Lord, since the time of Joel, you have called to your people. Help us now to have the courage to listen and respond. Amen.