

Spirit and Light
John 3.1-12
Pentecost +1 Year B
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When *A Prairie Home Companion's* narrator begins, "It was a dark night in a city that knows how to keep its secrets, but on the 12th floor of the Acme Building, one man is still trying to find the answers to life's persistent questions." We don't have to know about Guy Noir, *Private Eye* to anticipate some kind of drama is on the way.

We've gone to see a Summer blockbuster starring all the young, big name celebrities. The opening scene begins with a group of friends leaving dinner. They've just graduated from college and are saying their goodbyes. One friend ventures off alone as she shouts, "We'll always be best friends no matter what!" Then she turns a corner, a set of eyes flash in a dark alley, the music swells, and we know something terrible will happen.

Next, it's an old black and white film set in the 1920s. Two men in dark clothing are standing out in a warehouse district long after midnight. You can make out a pad-locked, iron fence behind them and hear a barking dog in the distance. Suddenly a town car with tinted windows appears and a person in the shadows flashes a briefcase filled with money. At the edge of our seats, hearts racing, we wait to see what happens next.

Then there's the story of Nic. It's an ancient scene with dusty roads and flames for light. The sun has almost set as he waits by the door and neighbors finish their evening chores, one by one. He waits until the last street lantern goes dark then starts to get nervous. He had practiced the route and knew it was time to move. With no one outside and the darkness to hide him, he throws on a cloak, grabs a bag, and steps into the night.

Buechner tells the rest this way:

Nicodemus had heard enough about what Jesus was up to in Jerusalem to make him think he ought to pay him a visit and find out more. On the other hand, as a VIP with a big theological reputation to uphold, he decided it might be just as well to pay it at night. Better to be at least fairly safe than to be sorry, he thought, so he waited till he thought his neighbors were all asleep.

So Nicodemus was fairly safe, and, at least at the start of their nocturnal interview, Jesus was fairly *patient*. What the whole thing boiled down to, Jesus told him, was that unless you got born again, you might as well give up.

That was all very well, Nicodemus said, but just how were you supposed to pull a thing like that off? How especially were you supposed to pull it off if you were pushing sixty-five? How did you get born again when it was a challenge just to get

out of bed in the morning? He even got a little sarcastic. Could one "enter a second time into the mother's womb?" he asked...

A gust of wind happened to whistle down the chimney at that point, making the dying embers burst into flame, and Jesus said being born again was like that. It wasn't something you did. The wind did it. The Spirit did it...

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked (John 3:9), and that's when Jesus really got going. Maybe Nicodemus had six honorary doctorates and half a column in Who's Who, Jesus said, but if he couldn't see something as plain as the nose on his face, he'd better go back to kindergarten.

Jesus said, "I'm telling you God's so in love with this world that he's sent me down, so if you don't believe your own eyes, then maybe you'll believe mine, maybe you'll believe me, maybe you won't come sneaking around scared half to death in the dark anymore, but will come to, come clean, come to life!"

What impressed Nicodemus even more than the speech was the quickening of his own breathing and the pounding of his own heart.¹

We understand darkness: the advantages, the disadvantages, the metaphor, the literal, the way we hide from it, the way it emboldens us, the way darkness works its way into our lives, the way we grow accustomed to its presence.

We explored darkness across six Sundays of Lent earlier this year. In fact, we even looked at the second half of this morning's Gospel text in the middle of that time; the part where Jesus tells Nicodemus that God loves the world so much that God sent Jesus into the world, not to condemn it but to save it. We return to John 3 this morning after our Easter celebration, after marking the Ascension of Jesus, after delighting in the presence of Pentecost in all its Spirit-induced creativity as we stand at the beginning of a long stretch the Church calls "Ordinary Time." With the reflecting and celebrating and delighting behind us and the common, the ordinary before us, we hear again of Nicodemus slinking through dark streets to ask his burning questions of Jesus.

"Perhaps," writes Ginger Barfield, "there is no story in the gospels that spells out the conundrum of belief as does the account of Nicodemus."

I suspect Nicodemus already knows the answers to his questions. Sure, he and Jesus are arguing theology and talking past each other. But he is there because he is eager. He trusts Jesus. He has seen the work Jesus does and heard the way he speaks before a crowd. He knows Jesus is the real deal and is talking about life and living and Spirit and faith in a way that resonates with a truth that Nicodemus has known but never taught. And he's trying to figure out how you go from sensing the rightness of a thing to living it out, particularly when it comes at the cost of letting go of so many old ways of being and doing and living.

¹ Nicodemus story via Frederick Buechner's *Peculiar Treasures*

They talk about being “born again.” That term irks me. It’s been overused and co-opted and joked about. Culturally, lumping folks together as the “born agains” typically means a newly fervent group of people who no longer know how to associate with the regular world, and so they disappear together with their private language and their self-righteousness with equal parts patting each other on the back and scowling at the rest of us. Some folks talk about the “born agains” like they used to talk about the folks dressed in all white who sold flowers at airports. No, thank you, I’m not interested.

I’m with Nicodemus here in my confusion. If I know I’m not *that* kind of “born again,” then what in the world is Jesus talking about?

Eugene Peterson plays around with the words a bit and quotes Jesus as saying, “You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit.

So don’t be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be ‘born from above’—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it’s headed next. That’s the way it is with everyone ‘born from above’ by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.”

The Spirit of God creating calling forth in Genesis 1, the movement of fire and language and baptism at Pentecost, this is what Jesus offers to Nicodemus. There is a way that God moves in the world that can move in you, too, and God moves in these ways because God loves. God’s love creates, God’s love grows, God’s love restores and repairs, invites and implores. God’s love is active and powerful. God’s love transcends and transforms. Step into the light, Nicodemus, and live out God’s love.

As we eavesdrop on this scene, we are hearing the invitation for our own lives. And we’re as confused as Nic is. We find comfort lurking in shadows and sitting in darkness. We tell our children to follow Jesus in the ways of kindness and love but have a pretty hard time believing we should do the same thing. We show up here and in each other’s lives, we pray, we study, but we often don’t make the connections between those private actions and our public selves. We can’t judge Nicodemus for lurking in shadows as he chases after Jesus because we do the same thing. So we are sitting alongside him as Jesus challenges us to walk this faith out into the light of day in common, ordinary time.

In February, progressive blogger and political writer Ana Marie Cox wrote publicly for the first time about being Christian. She shared, “In my personal life, my faith is not something I struggle with or something I take particular pride in. It is just part of who I am.

The only place where my spirituality feels volatile is in my professional life; the only time I've ever felt uncomfortable talking about my faith is when it comes up in conversation with colleagues.

It does come up: Since leaving Washington, I have made my life over and I am happier, freer, and healthier in body and spirit and apparently it shows. When people ask me, 'What changed?' or 'How did you do it?' or, sometimes, with nervous humor, 'Tell me your secret!' I have a litany of concrete lifestyle changes I can give them—simply *leaving Washington* is near the top of the list—but the honest answer would be this: I try, every day, to give my will and my life over to God. I try to be like Christ. I get down on my knees and pray."²

Maybe Nicodemus is like those acquaintances. He is watching Jesus and asking, "How did you do it? Tell me your secret!" It seems something about "the Spirit vocabulary of the Jesus people [was] incomprehensible."³ These people are living and moving in a way that carries some light with it. They're challenging power but with a contagious bravery. They're sharing things in common in a way that fosters abundance, not scarcity. Nicodemus understands that something of God is wrapped up in the actions of Jesus, and he wants in. His ability to welcome a birth of Spirit from above will be the thing that frees him to live out this transforming way in tomorrow's sunshine. We want that, too. It's not just enough to want it, of course, we have to practice and cultivate the ways of the Spirit. We have to welcome that light into our darkness.

Earlier this year, our Wednesday night dinner group spent several weeks talking about prayer and the widely different expressions prayer takes. We early on named that our talking, talking, talking prayer is so limited. Our words in prayer have their place, but great things happen when we can silence our chatter. And so we gave the rest of our weeks to listening, quiet, experiential practices. In one of those weeks, we looked beyond the Christian tradition to a few meditation practices and considered how some of those expressions might inform and invigorate our prayer lives.

My friend Connie has been teaching me for over a year now about an ancient Japanese practice of meditation that invites us to focus on breathing, pulses, and the kinds of energy we hold. Quite literally, you focus finger-by-finger on ways of being you want to release or embrace. On one hand: worry, fear, anger, guilt, pretense. On the other: harmony, love, peace, joy, ease of being. It's a wonderful visual of the choices we have before us in every moment. On one hand, the ways of being that limit and injure us and that negatively impact the world around as we move through it. On the other hand, the ways of being that give life and balance in the very best of ways and that radiate to the world around as we move through it.

² <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/02/28/why-i-m-coming-out-as-a-christian.html>

³ Gerard Sloyan, *Interpretation: John*, p. 45

It takes intention to connect with the Source of all things. It takes bravery to follow Nicodemus from shadow to sun. We know our dark side and we may secretly fear it is our *only* side. Jesus promises there is the great love of God to guide us, the Spirit to move like wind within us, and the steps of Jesus to follow.

What does it mean to be born again, born of the Spirit, bathed in light? Nicodemus was trying hard to understand this Jesus Way of life as it is and life as it could be, should be, one day will be. On the one hand, we have the life that we see—it's imperfections and fear, it's flaws and it's pitfalls. On the other hand we have the Life of Spirit, of wind, of movement driven from the Divine Source. We get to choose the life we will follow. We choose daily, hourly, with the breath of each moment which way we move. May we lend each other courage this morning to choose the way of the Spirit. May we be born from above.