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John 3:1-17

“Nick at Night”

Today’s Scripture could be called “Nick at Night”—the FIRST “Nick at Night”. Of course it has nothing to do with today’s TV programming on Nickelodeon. So, it’s silly- but the phrase may help us remember this story and its meaning for US.

Let’s start with “Nick”. Who was this Nicodemus? He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. Although the nation of Israel was not free, but occupied by Rome, Rome did permit some legal functions and powers to be handled by the Jews themselves. So, Nick was a leader, one of the rulers among the Jewish people.

Nicodemus was also a teacher- a “rabbi” like Jesus. The original Greek calls him **THE** Teacher, not just **A** teacher. Nick was an expert on many topics; he was a wise man in terms of faith and law. Remember, for the Jews faith and law were not separate, but ONE.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a special group within Judaism- a bit like a political party today, or like one “denomination” within Judaism.

The Pharisees were highly focused on the coming of the Messiah (“Christ” in Greek). They knew he was promised by God, foretold by ancient prophets. He would be sent by God and rule over all, bringing his kingdom of peace and harmony to the earth.

The Pharisees believed the Messiah and Kingdom of God would come only when every Jew obeyed God’s rules and laws perfectly. They tried to “put a hedge

around” the law. For example, one of the commandments is to “remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.” Sabbath began on Friday night at sundown, and ended on Saturday night. So the Pharisees put rules in place that required people to cease their work and rest, BEFORE the sun went down, just to be sure. They developed many rules like that, tiny details to keep God’s people from even accidentally violating God’s laws.

So, Nick was a faithful Jew, highly focused on the coming of God’s Messiah and God’s kingdom.

Let’s consider Jesus now. We claim he IS the Messiah, the Christ, sent by God. His message, preached as he emerged from temptation in the wilderness was this: “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Gospel.” Turn from your old ways, hear the good news of God’s saving love.

We can see why Nicodemus would have been interested in Jesus--- REALLY interested. The Messiah and God’s kingdom were the focus of his life!

But why did he visit Jesus AT NIGHT?

Jesus wasn’t following all the Pharisees’ complicated rules. He healed people on the Sabbath, violating the commandment to do no work on that sacred day. He didn’t wash properly before meals. He ate with sinners!

Jesus did not appear to be preparing to assume control of his nation—to rule over it as God’s kingdom where the Jews would finally know peace and harmony.

Give these realities, it was hard to believe he was the Messiah who would usher in God’s rule. Jesus was actually a DISGRACE to the Pharisees’ vision of a godly life.

The Jewish leaders were troubled by the fact that the PEOPLE were excited by Jesus. They saw him as a threat to order and holy living. They wanted him GONE. So----- Nicodemus was AFRAID to have his colleagues see him visit Jesus. He was afraid of their disapproval and of what they might do to him. So he came to see Jesus under the cover of darkness.

Friends, we are in Lent, the time of preparing for our celebration of Easter. Lent brings to mind the ways we wander in the wilderness as Jesus did, wrestling with temptation. Lent is a time for us to examine our personal darkness. It’s a time for us to get in touch with our fears; a time for us to consider things we don’t want others to know about us--- things we try to hide, disguise or mask.

Oh, how we recoil from doing this! But, with God, it's utterly foolish to pull away. The story of Nick at night assures us that whatever we do in secret or hide in darkness is known and seen by Jesus. It teaches us that when we find Christ in the midst of our secrets and fears, he will not harm us. He comes into this world, and into OUR DARKNESS, not to CONDEMN us, but to SAVE us.

John 3:16 is one of the most beloved verses of Scripture, as is the verse that follows it:

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.

This assurance is a great comfort, as it should be. We may then think we can just hang out with Jesus in our dark places, knowing he'll hold our hands and chase away our fears, right?

WRONG! Jesus did proclaim his saving love and power to Nicodemus. But he said something more. Jesus proclaimed our need to "come into the light". Christ has the power to cleanse us, redeem us, and transform all our hidden darkness. And his Holy Spirit has the power to BIRTH us into a NEW WAY of life where we WALK in a NEW WAY, following our Savior.

You see, Nick was waiting. He was waiting for God's kingdom to arrive. And Jesus said, "The kingdom is at hand—right here! Just reach out and take it. The Spirit is available as a re-creating agent to make you and life NEW RIGHT NOW. Take, by faith, your first steps into the kingdom of God TODAY."

Jesus is speaking to each of us here today. We all have darkness in our lives. We may think- "Oh, my faults aren't so bad." Here's an example: are you a door slammer? I have to confess, I've walked that road. It won't get you sent to prison, but God wants you to find better ways of dealing with your frustrations and anger.

Jesus calls us to expose the darkness of our hearts and lives to him. There are many ways to do this- we can pray directly to Christ; we can discuss our struggles with a trusted friend; we can read about or research situations that pull us off the path of faithful living. We can even approach a counselor or pastor- or consider a support group. In all of this, KEEP ON PRAYING to Jesus.

He loves us as we are---- door slamming and all.

His light is strong enough to banish all darkness.
His Spirit is here RIGHT NOW to birth us into a new life.
He is patient and will receive us again and again, as we turn to him.
He CAN and WILL teach us to be a people of light, rather than darkness.

How did old Nick end up? Nicodemus claimed the body of Jesus with Joseph of Arimathea, taking him to the tomb for burial. He gave about 100 pounds of spices for Christ's body. This might compare to dropping about \$3,000 in the offering plate today. It surely seems the Spirit was making him a new person, doesn't it?

Will you pray with me?

Thank you, Jesus, for meeting us in all our darkness. Enter our hearts. Shine your light into them. May we be born of your Spirit and be made new. Amen.