

Homily, Stephen Crippen, Lent 2A, 3-5-2023, QA Lutheran Church, 1

He came to Jesus by night.

Night: this means something. This is not just a timestamp, not a meaningless detail from a remembered conversation, as in, “Oh, well yes I went to see Jesus... I think it was after dark, if I’m not mistaken.” No, night is where ignorance reigns: in other encounters with Jesus, the Pharisees can see with their physical eyes, but their blindness to the truth is a kind of night. They are benighted.

Or night is worse than ignorance: night is the dominion of evil. When Judas gets up and leaves the table before Jesus is arrested — when he gets up to betray Jesus — John the evangelist then says, “And it was night.”

Nicodemus does not prove to be evil, but he comes to Jesus in the night nonetheless, the night of his own ignorance, the night of his own anxiety, the night that descends on someone — and surrounds someone — when they don’t have the full picture. They don’t get it. At least they don’t get it *yet*. But don’t count Nicodemus out: he returns to the story twice after this nocturnal encounter, and each time he distinguishes himself as a worthy ally of the movement. But for now, he is in the night.

(And I can’t resist encouraging you to give even Judas Iscariot a second look. Yes, Judas is lost in a terrible night of wretched betrayal, but Jesus may somehow be finding him there, even now. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”)

Yes, the night of ignorance and evil is awful, but *Jesus is also found there*. Nicodemus, Judas, all of us – if we find ourselves in the night, we will also find Jesus. He is staying up late on the night Nicodemus searches for him. Jesus stays up in the night for anyone who might restlessly be seeking a

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way out of the night of their own ignorance. *Jesus stays up*. He welcomes the conversation. He is there to shine some light.

Some scholars read the encounter of Nicodemus and Jesus as a story of confrontation, challenge, debate. They can trace in the text the pattern of ancient Greek and Near-Eastern debating rituals. There's the opening line that disingenuously flatters the opponent ("Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God"); and then the incredulous questions that sound almost cynical: Nicodemus may be goading Jesus into deeper conflict, and only feigning ignorance, when he says, "How can these things be?". And Jesus is a worthy adversary, lightly taunting Nicodemus with the dry line, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

But even if this is a hostile encounter, Nicodemus is impressively open-minded. He stays in conversation with Jesus, and again, he returns two more times — in the daytime — to stay in relationship with Jesus.

Later in the Gospel according to John, a few chapters on, Nicodemus encourages other leaders to keep an open mind about this odd Galilean who seems to be provoking the people into what amounts to a rebellion. Nicodemus says to his angry colleagues, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" Notice the invitational stance here: he doesn't throw down with the leaders; he's not berating them. He's just asking a question, inviting them to stop, listen, and discern. And again, this is now the daytime: Nicodemus is emerging from ignorance. His mind is opening.

Then, much later, it is Nicodemus who quietly helps bury the crucified Jesus, and he brings *one hundred pounds* of myrrh and aloes to anoint the body! This is the burial of a monarch; it is as if Jesus is going into a

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pyramid or the Taj Mahal. *One hundred pounds*: this is a lavish, startling proclamation by Nicodemus about the royal identity of Jesus. Jesus, says Nicodemus, while holding a dizzyingly expensive amount of fine spices — Jesus is the King.

So place me in the camp of those who think this encounter in the night is *not* a hostile debate. In our era, maybe the last thing we need is pointers on how to beat your opponent in a cynical war of words. As benighted as Nicodemus might be, he wants to learn; he wants to understand; he wants to change and grow. Nicodemus has been called the “Patron of Curiosity,” that is, the saint for anyone who cultivates a life of curiosity and rejects polarization and reductive, destructive conflict.

This week I learned a little about the National High School Ethics Bowl, which, if it were a Christian organization, it should take Nicodemus as its founder and patron. I was never a good debater in high school, but I remember the basics: there are two sides in conflict, affirmative and negative; if you’re in the affirmative, you have to defend your thesis about a topic in every particular, but if you’re in the negative, you need only make one persuasive argument against the thesis, and the affirmative side falls in defeat. High school debate is rigorous and I think fundamentally good: it teaches kids how to think critically. But listen to how the National High School Ethics Bowl is designed.

Here’s a description from their website: “An Ethics Bowl differs from a Speech and Debate competition in that students are not assigned opposing views; rather, they defend the position they actually hold or think is reasonable, [they] provide each other with constructive criticism, and [they] win by demonstrating that they have thought rigorously and systematically about the cases and engaged respectfully and supportively with all participants” (end quote). It’s a competition, but it encourages authentic

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perspectives about an important topic, and it encourages people to collaborate, to cooperate ... to step out of the night.

Healthy debate is not meant to identify winners and losers. The life of the mind is not a contest; it's not a zero-sum game. When we find Jesus in the night, we bask in the light of shared inquiry, cooperative curiosity, collaborative discernment. Notice, then, how the relationship of Nicodemus and Jesus shifts, and they quietly change places: when they first meet, Nicodemus is in need of enlightenment, lost in the night of ignorance; but by the end, Nicodemus is a graceful witness to the world about the Good News of Jesus Christ, while Jesus himself is in the night of death. This is a spiritual friendship that nourishes and cares for both persons. They emerge from the night together.

What might be the night of your own experience, your own life? What blocks the sun, for you? Maybe you enjoy a cultural privilege that blinds you to the experience of those who are not educated, or have not inherited wealth, or are persons of color, or whose gender identity moves them down in our cultural system of oppression. Or maybe your night is not that dreadful, but you are under a shadow cast by your preferences and habits: you live your life much as you always have, so there are people and experiences that are unfamiliar to you, and therefore frightening. Or it's a different kind of dreadful night that overshadows you: you are a survivor of trauma, and find it exceedingly hard to trust anyone, to build friendship, to live comfortably in the light.

Whatever our fears may be, our limitations, our injuries, our nagging uncertainties, whatever benights us, we are invited – like Nicodemus, and like Abram and Sarai long before him – we are invited to simply *go*, to step into the night, into the unfamiliar, into that which frightens us. There we will find Jesus, who stayed up to talk to us: we will find Jesus *here*, in this

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gathered community, which is the Body of Christ. Here we will find friendship, collaboration, cooperation, a shared curiosity. Here we will find ministers by our side, even unto death, when they will bring fabulous spices to honor our dignity as members of Christ's royal priesthood.

So step out into the night. Bring your questions. Notice your fears. Out here, in the wee hours, long before sunrise, you will find Jesus embodied by this gathered community. They brought their questions, too. Many of your friends feel your same fears, and for many of your friends the night is quite dreadful, maybe, for some of them, much worse than yours. But this community has Jesus as its founder and guide. This is Christ's Body, risen and active in the world, shining light ever outward. Now that you've found Jesus in the night, what question might you ask first?