

“Hope in the Dark”

A sermon by Pastor Nicholas Gliha

September 30, 2018

Hey: There is something power about candlelight. Whether it be a prayer walk at conference, candlelight vigils at Christmas Eve, or listening to the rain beat against the tin roof our apartment with nothing but a candle to dimly illuminate the room. I’m not sure what it is exactly, but something about candles are therapeutic. The flicker of dancing fire, the slight warmth they radiate, or perhaps it is the beautiful contrast of a faint light against the darkness that draws us to candles.

You(?): As our opening video has suggested to you, life is hard. If you have been tuning into the news lately it definitely gives off the story that life is hard. For many long time members of the church to see the church in an age of decline and be battered by the news of a deficit can be hard. To be bombarded with Healthy Church Initiative requests for surveys, questionnaires, long meetings (by the way there is a workshop after church today starting at 12pm that we would really love for you to stay. Food has been ordered for 25-30 people and we only have about 20 signed up so last second people are more than welcome to stick around) only to be given a *prescription* about why we are unhealthy can be a hard thing to hear. And when the storms of life come, when life gets hard it’s easiest and most tempting to huddle in the darkness and hope it passes by us. But today we are going to meet a character that had been hiding in the darkness for so, so long and saw the light of the world pass him by and made a decision that changed his life forever. I hope today you will make that same decision.

Look: Our scripture today, as you have heard, introduces us to a character named Nicodemus who comes to Jesus in the middle of the night, or specifically comes to Jesus in the shroud of darkness. I have heard, and I suspect you have heard at least one sermon on this pericope as it contains some of the most powerful verses on Christian living. We are introduced to the challenge of faith beyond signs, the theological concept of anothen, the greek for “to be born again/from above” and lastly the affirmation that Jesus is the light of the world against darkness. Heavy stuff. But one theme that I hear too often is condemnation for Nicodemus.

Some preachers say he is a coward for coming in the middle of the night, some say he is foolish for not understanding Jesus’ metaphorical teachings on being born again and then some. But I am not so confident of those condemnations. I mean I get where they are coming from, the darkness represents sin, and sin is when we are missing the mark of God’s plan for us and thus living separate from God and yeah that’s bad but I don’t think God is a God that shames us when we are struggling and messing up but lovingly provides us with grace, mercy and resurrection into a life everlasting. So on that note, I think Nicodemus represents courage and I even argue as much that Jesus says the same. I think this because of contemporary issues have shown a new light onto this scripture. You see, Nicodemus is not some individual, some random guy that joined the crusade, he represents something more. The Gospel of John is less about “what” happened historically and more about “why” it happened and as such is less invested in historical accuracy as it is symbolic truth.

So then, Nicodemus represents a community, a community that is presumably on the outside of Jesus’ following but is clearly interested. So if we know of Nicodemus as an individual who represents a community in the light of contemporary issues I think he is courageous. Consider how women have tried to reclaim their voice against sexual predators. From Harvey Weinstein with the single person who came

forth in fear and trembling but came forth and it started the avalanche of the #MeToo movement where a community who was previously in the dark had the courage, the platform and the support to give their voice to change. Just recently Brett Kavanaugh had allegations put against him from many, many years ago which gave rise to the new movement, the #WhyIDidn'tReport movement. This movement where women share past experiences of sexual assault and their respective reasons for why they did not report or examples of when they did report and how it was dismissed and they learned their voices did not matter. All of these movements began from someone who lived in the shadows and had the courage to step out towards the light. Nicodemus, in my opinion, is not coward, rather the opposite. But he wasn't perfect! Hardly, he still struggled to understand Jesus' real mission and only cared about one thing. The magic. The pizzazz. The glamour. The *signs*.

If we look at two verses before our pericope today from the end of the second chapter and it is on the screen for your viewing pleasure it says this "when he [Jesus] was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival many believed in him because they saw the *signs* that he was doing" fast forward to Nicodemus' introduction as a character and his first words to Jesus are "Rabbi, teacher, a sign of respect to Jesus despite their potential differences. He says "Rabbi, we know that you are teacher that has come from God for no one can do these *signs* that you do apart from the presence of God." So Nicodemus and the curious onlookers whom he represents in Jerusalem respect Jesus' teachings but are amazed by Jesus because of his miracles.

In other words they like coming to church to hear about God's call over God's people to love the poor, feed the hungry, cloth the naked and visit the imprisoned and lonely but they REALLY LOVE God when God makes the Cleveland Browns win their first game in nearly 2 years I mean give it up for the signs of God working miracles in Cleveland (woo! Clap) or they try and rationalize the conception of Jesus within human frameworks. This group whom Nicodemus represents might say things such as how Jesus can be both human and divine, created and yet uncreated, ascended and yet present with us, and don't even get me started on the whole resurrection thing. In other words they don't want to be open to following Jesus until they can 100% understand who this man is. And this kind of thinking seems to irritate Jesus as he kind of blows off Nicodemus, right?

Instead of even somewhat answering him he instead says "very truly I tell you no one can see the kingdom of God unless they have been born from above." This line is where we get the concept of being a born again Christian, the washing away of ones earthly shell to live as a citizen of heaven. And yeah, I get that, sure, but I also struggle when we take it too far to say that we are literally made anew because that then implies that God messed up with you originally when you were created and born and God needs to come over you and upgrade you to version 2.0. I think God got you right the first time around and that you are fearfully and wonderfully made as the scriptures declare over us even in all of your faults. They don't need to be washed away and forgotten, they need to be a part of your story, your witness.

Sure, you may have gone through a trial of life where you hurt people, where you hurt yourself with additions, where you cheated people out of money, not been present enough for your child but let us not forget that Nicodemus walked in the darkness as well and later in chapter 7 stands up for Jesus against his fellow Pharisees and finally is present with the disciples in preparing Jesus body after his crucifixion so no matter if you have walked in the darkness before or are walking in it now know that

God loves you, God wants to bring you into the light of a resurrected life and be a witness for those that still suffer in the darkness.

Wait, wait, wait, did I say that Nicodemus stands up against the Pharisees later? A group that we and he knows is violent against blasphemy as they raise stones against Jesus later in the gospel of John and Paul, who was a Pharisee raised stones against Stephen in Acts, so Nicodemus, this fearful, coward of a man in the shroud of night stood up to the Pharisees!? What in the heck happened here? This leads us to verses 3-10, the bit about being born again from above and baptism is hinted at in the water and spirit part and the more than Nicodemus tries to figure out the more frustrated Jesus gets and so Jesus lashes out at him and says “what don’t you get?! You claim to be a teacher of the law and you don’t get what it is that I am saying?” In other words, Jesus, who is God, is talking to a priest about God’s law and God is the one saying “what don’t you get?” If that is not the best example of the absolute worst case scenario of fact checking for Nicodemus than I don’t know what is....somebody say anothen. Look to your neighbor and say anothen. Look to your neighbor behind you and say anothen. What’s anothen? I could tell you but showing you is more fun.

With one hand do me a favor and place it over your heart. Feel it pumping. Feel its strength. With your other hand I want you to reach it up as high as you can to the heavens above. Close your eyes if you’re cool with that. Take a deep breath in and on the way out say it with me, say anothen. Anothen is the greek word for born again but it also means from above. There is no literal translation and to only call it born again or calling it from above doesn’t give it an authentic meaning. So this demonstration reminds us that the heart we have that beats with passions, frustrations, fears and life is given to us from above and it has been enriched by the breath of the spirit in our baptism *so that* we might have a heart that is overflowing of love, mercy, grace and kindness and *so that* we might begin to see the signs of the kingdom of heaven around us.

Sooo, when Jesus is confronting this Pharisee, this priest, this religious figure, this resident theologian, this man named Nicodemus and saying to him “what do you not understand” he is clearly saying that what we are currently doing is not right. It’s not right because although we love God we are still afraid of death and thus hide in the shadows to avoid troubling the waters. But, friends, here is the thing, a baptized person according to the scriptures no longer fears death. That is the central message of the Gospel of John and the core of that famous line of scripture: For God so *loved* the world that He gave His only son so that those who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life.” For John, eternal life begins *now*, it is a state of being in which we are not afraid of death, in which we experience a new life in Christ to be the builders of God’s desired kingdom and to build that kingdom beings to disturb the waters and the challenge the status quo.

The only way we are going to see the kingdom of God around us is by stepping out of the darkness towards the light that is Jesus Christ, following the light, baptizing ourselves in the light *so that* we can be the light for the darkness that still exists and as the scriptures have declared the light has shined in the darkness and the darkness has not, is not, will not overcome it and when the darkness is no more than there shall be a New Jerusalem *here. On. Earth.* A land where there will be no more crying, no more pain, no more death, a land where there will be equality of all races and cultures, a land where there will be no more rich or poor, a land where there will be no more widowed and orphaned, a land where there will be no more who are lonely and hurting, a land where boys, *boys* will stop being predators over a woman’s body, a land where no longer people will feel the need to hide in the darkness

for they are afraid of repercussions of exposure, a land, a good land, a perfect land, a land that we call the kingdom of God here on earth as it is in heaven...So Nicodemus, what don't you get? You study God, you say you love God, but are you willing now to *follow* God? You can't follow the light if you are comfortable in the dark. So whatever it is today that has you in the shadow. Be it troubled relationships. Difficulty to pay the bills. Unsteadiness at work. People convincing you aren't good enough. Fears that you haven't been a good enough parent. Fears you've lived in the dark you're whole life and God won't use you. Fears of the healthy church initiative. Or whatever it is. Step out. Step out of the darkness. Stand up at this time as we prepare to close and come into our closing song. Together say this prayer with me out loud. Maybe grab the hand of the person next to you if they are comfortable with that because when you're in the darkness for so long you need a little support from someone else to come out. For some of you this might be the first time, for others this might be a renewal but whatever it is pray like Nicodemus and ask Jesus "I know that you are my teacher, but I know you are more than that even if I don't understand, so be the Lord of my life, let me walk in the light, so I can cast out the darkness in other people's lives, so that together we can build your kingdom here on earth."