

Nicodemus is one of my favorite characters in John's gospel. He appears only in John's gospel, but three different times. He is a Pharisee, but, unlike his fellow Pharisees who see Jesus as a threat to their power and authority, he is curious about Jesus. Curious enough to come and see Jesus, but only brave enough to come at night, lest his fellow Pharisees see him.

During this encounter Jesus and Nicodemus have a conversation that in many ways sounds to me like Abbott and Costello's "who's on first..." They are talking at cross purposes. Jesus is speaking spiritually while Nicodemus is hearing everything he is saying literally. To be born anew is to be radically changed through the power and grace of God.

Nicodemus can't move beyond the most literal understanding of what Jesus is saying, and maybe he doesn't yet want to. Because to truly understand Jesus is to be changed by him. A Pharisee who comes to see Jesus by night out of curiosity might not be ready to see the light and then face what that might mean for the comfortable life he is now living. He might not be ready to go where his journey is taking him.

What I hope we are hearing is the distinction Jesus is drawing between things of this world and things of God's kingdom. Much of what Jesus says should sound familiar to us, even if, we, too, sometimes resist what it may mean for us.

Despite his seemingly resistance, I find it fascinating that Nicodemus is comfortable enough with Jesus to question him, "How can these things be?" It is also indicative of a growing faith, that one is comfortable enough to ask questions, even if it is still in the dark of night. We pray for the newly baptized that they will have an inquiring and discerning heart – because questions are a part of our faith journey.

Nicodemus' second appearance is some time later, as the temple authorities are plotting to put Jesus on trial. Here, near the end of Jesus' ministry, full of healing miracles and teaching about the kingdom of God, these authorities are convinced that Jesus must be put to death lest they lose whatever power and control they have over the people of God who are increasingly finding hope in Jesus' message. Remember, Nicodemus is one of these temple authorities, yet he speaks up publicly, asking them a question, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" as a way to remind them of their responsibility to the law, and a way to protect Jesus. And we are left wondering, if Nicodemus been somehow changed by Jesus.

Our final encounter with Nicodemus seems to answer this question with a resounding yes. Because it is with Joseph of Arimathea that Nicodemus comes, carrying a hundred pounds of spices to prepare Jesus' body for burial. No longer in secret, but very publicly, by his actions, Nicodemus proclaims Jesus as Lord. Nicodemus has come out of the darkness into the light. Through his journey with Jesus, he has been transformed.

So, what did he discover that changed him so completely? Our own Vance Morgan's writing for the second Sunday in Lent in his book *A Year of Faith and Philosophy*, was very helpful as I prepared what to say today. There seems a throw-a-way line in the gospel about Moses lifting up

a serpent in the wilderness in the same way Jesus must be lifted up. You may not be familiar with the story of how God sent poisonous snakes to the wandering and misbehaving children of Israel to remind them of their rebelliousness. Once many were bitten and died and the people recognized their rebelliousness, God, in God's mercy, equipped Moses with a serpent on a staff so that any who looked at it would live.

As Jesus applies this story to himself, Vance reminds us, we are to look at Jesus; to focus our attention on him, in order to live – to enjoy the life God has given us now to its fullest, and the life that is promised for all eternity. Seeing is just, if not more, important than doing.

God is a God of love who desires only the very best for all of creation. And while Lent is a time to repent and return to the Lord, God has never gone anywhere. God is with us, in the midst of us, sharing life with us. We are the ones who have wandered away. God is there willing and waiting for us to turn back.

And just to make sure we know this, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” John 3:16 sums up the whole of the gospel, the Good News. We have only to look, to see, like Nicodemus. To ask our questions because true faith is full of questions. To engage with Jesus in ways that will transform us into the person God created each of us to be – unique in our own right, but universally loved by God, not in spite of who we are, but because of who we are.

In Lent, and throughout our spiritual journey, we confess where we have gone wrong, we repent and return to the open and loving arms of God despite our failings. And, we remember, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

What we do is not as important in the end as how what we do shapes who we already are, beloved children of God. When we see and know this in the depths of our beings, we, and the world in which we live, will be changed, born again, to be the creatures and creation God means for us to be. This is our journey of faith.