

Darkness and Light

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There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For 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. "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." John 3:1-17

We all know what it means to say, in a certain way, perhaps with a smirk and a knowing look, that someone is *in the dark*. We say this when we believe someone is clueless. For whatever reason, they can't see what we and others see. Or they can't see anything that contradicts how they've always seen things. Or maybe they are looking in the wrong places. They are 'in the dark.'

Today's appointed gospel introduces us to a character who, from the point of view of the text, is or has been in the dark. The encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus is crafted so that we, the readers, are *in the know*, while Nicodemus increasingly struggles. His last line in the scene is a befuddled question: "*How can these things be?*" We never learn if or how he finds an answer.

Right at the start of the scene we are told that Nicodemus '*came to Jesus by night.*' He may have come by night because that's when his schedule permitted. Or maybe he was unsure what his peers would say if he was seen with the upstart, controversial street preacher named Jesus. But the motives of Nicodemus aren't explained, and they don't particularly matter. In John's gospel, in particular, the time of day or night is often mentioned, and it nearly always signifies something more. In the case of Nicodemus, when we're told that he came to Jesus by night, the author is almost certainly wanting us to know that Nicodemus is, as we say, in the dark.

As or more important as times of day or night, and closely related in John's gospel, are darkness and light. Before we even know the name of Jesus in the opening lines of the gospel, the author introduces him by saying, '*in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*' (John 1:4) Two lines after the end of the text we heard today, Jesus himself will say, '*this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.*' (3:19) Later in the gospel, of course, and unique to this gospel, Jesus says of himself, "*I am the Light of the world.*" (8:12) In this larger context of the gospel, it's no mistake that the author wants us to know that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night.

Before we learn that he came to Jesus by night, we learn that Nicodemus was ‘a leader of the Jews’— perhaps a ‘Very Reverend’ or even something more! – in any case learned, respected, someone who was included in important decisions, maybe even considered wise. Even so, Nicodemus was in the dark, and his individual stature as a leader of the Jews and the darkness that hampers his vision and faith are soon developed in John’s gospel as an indictment of all the religious authorities of Jesus’ time and what they stand for, or what they don’t stand for, what they see or don’t see as important. From the point of view of John’s Gospel, they are all in the dark.

As nice as it would be to keep all of this at a comfortable historical distance, this theme in John’s gospel could rightly serve as the basis for a critique of any and all religious institutions and the motives, messages and priorities of all clergy, in whatever tradition and in whatever age.

And as nice as it would be to confine our look to institutions and clergy, the text here is likely also meant to draw us all in personally. Are we truly *in the know*? Or do we begin to wonder how we ourselves are in the dark, perhaps recognize ways that we have come to Jesus by night, compelled by our own trail of secrets and sorrows and shadowy expectations or choices.

Some of us may recoil from the notion that we have come or need to come to Jesus by night. But in her book, ‘*Learning to walk in the dark*,’ the author Barbara Brown Taylor invites us to fearlessly open the door, go out into that very night, explore it, wonder what in it may be of value. The light that shines in the darkness, she points out, may not even be visible without the darkness itself. And the darkness, and our experiences of it – sorrow, fear, loss, disappointment – are intrinsic to what makes the light ultimately meaningful at all.

Furthermore, she argues that the movement from darkness to light is not as easy as flipping a light switch once. And to the extent that we may have experienced being ‘*born from above*,’ it’s not a one time, once-and-for-all experience. Alternating day and night are a most fundamental part of creation, native as well, she suggests, to a growing and supple spiritual life. The natural topography of the earth, and the natural topography of the human heart, inevitably include zones of light and darkness, even simultaneously.

“*If I have any expertise*,” she writes, “*it is in the realm of spiritual darkness ...*” And then she defines her experiences of that darkness: “*fear of the unknown, familiarity with divine absence, mistrust of conventional wisdom, suspicion of religious comforters, keen awareness of the limits of all language about God and at the same time shame over my inability to speak of God without a thousand qualifiers, doubt about the health of my soul, and barely suppressed contempt for those who have no such qualms.*”

Elsewhere, Taylor points out that in many churches the biggest spectacle of the year, with the most flowers and the brightest lights, is saved for Easter Day. But consider, she asks, how the primal resurrection first stirred in utter darkness. She may have been pondering the first words of the resurrection account in John’s gospel: “*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb ...*” (John 20:1)

Ideally, our own Easter Vigil here will begin in utter darkness, not mainly so that we will be delighted by the display of flowers when the lights are turned on, but to remind us that we have all come, and we all continue to come, to Jesus by night.

How will you or I recognize or experience Easter without coming to Jesus by night? Where is it dark for you now? What lesson or lessons may be there for you or me in that darkness? How can these lessons help us to move toward and prepare for the Light of the world? *Amen.*