



“Difficult Questions, No Easy Answers”
2nd Sunday in Lent
March 20, 2011

Prayer: “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” -- Psalm 121:2

Texts: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

There is something about conversations and the middle of the night. They can be fruitful as when spouses or those newly in love share their deepest secrets, hopes, and dreams with one another. Or, they can be unproductive, such as when college (or seminary) students stay up all night, either to discuss the meaning of life and the universe rather than working on the research paper due the next day, or when students pull an all-nighter studying for an exam.

Yet have you ever noticed in deep conversations where questions are asked that sometimes more questions are left unanswered? This is true in our Gospel today. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night – a time when most people are usually sleeping.

We do not know the exact time of ‘the middle of the night’ that Nicodemus comes to Jesus. Throughout the Gospel of John, John is more concerned with those who do not know Jesus stepping out and away from the darkness of their sin and into the light of God’s love. For John, Nicodemus recognizes his own separation from the presence of God.

Nicodemus comes, in curiosity, to see for himself who “this” Jesus is. He has heard much about Jesus, but his knowledge is limited. Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus as a rabbi, a teacher come from God. Even in this understanding, Nicodemus trips himself up by saying, ‘we know you because of your signs.’

Nicodemus does not see Jesus for who He is as the Son of God – but from what Nicodemus has heard that Jesus has done. Nicodemus’ night visit is a visit in secret. Nicodemus does not want others to know he is coming to Jesus, or even why he is coming to Jesus.

In this admission of how Nicodemus knows Jesus through his signs, Nicodemus also admits he does not know Jesus. Like a ball of loosely wound yarn, Nicodemus’ arguments, and perhaps beliefs begin to unravel as our Gospel unfolds. Slowly at first, these doubts unravel as Jesus engages in dialogue with him. Jesus challenges Nicodemus on his misperceptions and doubts. Nicodemus is quick to argue from the belief system he is familiar with. After all, Nicodemus is a member of the Jewish ruling council. These are beliefs that have been instilled in him since an early age. These are also the same beliefs that helped Nicodemus be in the leadership position he is in, and the same beliefs that have helped him understand the blend of faith and religion upon his everyday life.

This is where the original Greek and the English translations differ from each other. In the Greek, the word *anōthen* means “from above”, “again”, or “anew”. It is this double meaning which causes Nicodemus trouble in his understanding. Nicodemus is quick to argue back that it is not possible for a human to re-enter a mother’s womb. And he is right; it would be difficult for us to return to our mother’s years after we have been born. We have grown in many ways. No longer can we be measured in inches or ounces. If anything, we wish we could still be measured in inches and ounces rather than feet and pounds!

The Christian life has frequently been referred to as new life – giving up the old ways which prevent us from growing closer to Christ. Being born anew is a matter of repentance, of turning our lives, our actions, our behaviors around in a way that can be radically different from what we are used to. These changes can also be different for those around us who know us better than we think they do.

Jesus sees the difficulty Nicodemus is having in understanding Jesus' words about being born again. To press his point, Jesus explains one cannot be born again unless it is of water and the Spirit. This is another point Nicodemus does not understand.

We who hear this today, can see and know Jesus' words as a reference both to baptism and to entering the Christian community. While Nicodemus does not have the same understanding of baptism as we do, Nicodemus was familiar with baptism. This understanding was that if someone who was not of the Jewish faith decided to become Jewish, they went through what was termed a "proselyte baptism". During this baptism, the believer was fully immersed in water. This form of baptism was a private, individual bathing or cleansing. It was something done to the person rather than for the person.

Now, if Nicodemus were Lutheran, I would suspect this is probably the part where he slept through confirmation, particularly the part in the Small Catechism that explains Holy Baptism. Baptism is not merely water, but water used according to God's command and connected with God's Word. Luther continues, "it is not water alone that produces these effects, but the Word of God connected with the water, and our faith which relied on the Word of God connected with the water. For without the Word of God, water is merely water, and no Baptism. But when connected with the Word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit. . . ." (*from "Luther's Small Catechism"; explanation of The Sacrament of Holy Baptism*)

Nicodemus is not Lutheran. By this point in the conversation, Nicodemus's loosely wrapped ball of yarn is unraveling. Nicodemus is left holding the ends, trying to pick up his identity and his beliefs as Jesus challenges Nicodemus' lack of understanding about baptism, about God's plan of salvation for the entire world, about the difference between light and darkness.

Sadly, there are times our approach to Jesus is quite similar to that of Nicodemus. We come, with a curiosity that at times has us overly certain of ourselves. We bring our misconceptions about faith, thinking that because we have not seen, we know all there is to know. And, like Nicodemus, we discover also that we do not have all the answers to life or to faith.

Nicodemus approached Jesus with serious questions about faith and belief. These questions went beyond 'how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?' For Nicodemus, they were important questions – questions he needed to ask to assist him in coming to Jesus.

In seminary, one of my professors during small group discussion for his course would ask a question of us whenever we asked a question. His question back to us was, "why do you ask?" It was his way of helping us articulate why the question was important. The only problem was, this was not a stated "rule" of the class! It was something we had to learn through trial and error. The first time I asked a question, and heard in reply, "why do you ask?" I was intimidated, almost terrified I had asked perhaps the "wrong" question. As the semester wore on, and I continued to ask questions, I began to learn how these questions were important, both in my understanding of Jesus, and to my faith.

Nicodemus reminds us in asking questions of Jesus that there are questions that will not and do not have easy answers to them. These are questions about life, about faith, about the things that are important to us. In light of recent events in the world, one of my big questions now, is “why has the natural devastation happened?” While I understand the scientific explanation, it is also a question that does not have an easy answer to it at all.

We learn also from Nicodemus’ questions of Jesus that God’s plan of salvation extends beyond our limited understanding. Our Gospel reading ends with verse 17. But John continues with more on God’s plan of salvation for the world:

“Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”(John 3:18-21, New Revised Standard Version.)

God’s plan of salvation includes not only you and me, but those who do not believe, and those who have yet to believe. It is a plan that started at the beginning of time, and a plan that will continue long after we have left this earth. It includes us because of God’s love for us, but is not dependent upon us.

The questions we have can keep us in the dark. The questions we have can also lead us into the light. Nicodemus’ questions bring him back to the Light two other times in John’s Gospel. Again, both times Nicodemus appears at night or in darkness. The first time Nicodemus is trying to advocate for Jesus while Jesus is on trial. The second time, Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus’ body down from the cross and prepare it for burial. Nicodemus wanted to believe the reality he was part of God’s salvation for the entire world. That is why he kept coming back. But there was something in Nicodemus’ understanding that prevented him from leaving the darkness completely and coming into the light.

Singer/songwriter Billy Joel, wrote a song several years ago about questions, and searching in the middle of the night. When I hear this song, it reminds me of Nicodemus because of his search for something that would provide answers to the questions he had upon his heart:

*In the middle of the night, I go walking in my sleep
From the mountains of faith to a river so deep.
I must be looking for something, something sacred I lost
But the river is wide, and it’s too hard to cross. . . .
Even though I know the river is wide, I walk down every evening
and stand on the shore.
And I try to cross to the opposite side, so I can finally find
what I’ve been looking for. . .
In the middle of the night, I go walking in my sleep
Through the jungle of doubt to a river so deep
I know I’m searching for something, something so undefined,
That it can only be seen, by the eyes of the blind,
In the middle of the night. . . (from River of Dreams; @1993, by Sony Records.)*

In these days of Lent, dear brothers and sisters, may God grant us the wisdom, the courage, and the strength to ask the questions that are on our hearts, and to be faithful in searching for the answers, that our faithfulness would lead us ever closer to the cross. Amen.