

Text: John 3: 1-17
Title: Sleepless in the South Suburbs
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I lay awake almost every night from 3:00 to 5:00. I don't set an alarm but I usually wake to a few restless hours of wondering, worrying, reading, writing in my head, wrestling with God, and wishing that I could fall back asleep. I toss and turn between anxieties, insecurities, doubts, and demons....

You'd think that at this point I'd have more answers than questions.

You'd think that at this point I'd be more settled.

You'd think that at this point I'd be more confident.

You'd be wrong.

Answers don't always settle questions.

Professional success doesn't always calm restless waters.

Contentment doesn't mean that brokenness and mystery don't keep you awake at night.

Nicodemus is my patron saint.

Something made this respected, religious scholar, who had been to the best schools and studied with the best professors, go looking for Jesus. Men of his stature don't lurk around at night but some unsettled question made him restless.

Something kept him tossing and turning until he pulled a coat over his nightclothes, threw back a quick shot of courage, and snuck out of the house.

Nicodemus slipped through the moonlit shadows of Jerusalem to find Jesus.

He was looking for a word.

He was looking for answers.

He was looking for some peace.

He was looking for a good night's sleep.

He was looking for God.

Most scholars think that Nicodemus tracked down Jesus at night because he was a coward. He was afraid of being caught cavorting with this rabble-rousing-rabbi. Jesus made a mess of things in the temple and was stirring up the commoners. He was a threat to the ruling elite and there'd be hell to pay if Nicodemus was seen talking to Jesus, so he went at night. That's scholarly opinion. But I wonder if Nicodemus went to Jesus at night because he's one of us.

Maybe you came to church this morning hoping, seeking, longing for peace and connection to God. Maybe you lay awake worrying about how you'll stay afloat, juggle bills, or manage expectations. Maybe you've been struggling with your own doubts and demons. Maybe loneliness gnaws. Maybe you're befuddled by Jesus and wonder why faith seems to work for others but not for you. Maybe Nicodemus wasn't a coward but one of us ~ one of the sleepless in the south suburbs.

Which is why it seems worth noting that the second chapter of John's gospel ends this way:

For he knew what was in people (anthropo)

And chapter three begins with:

Now there was a person (anthropos)

Nicodemus is an example of what was in people. The text reads this way:

Many believed in his name because they saw the signs/miracles which he was doing. But Jesus, himself, did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and had no need for anyone to testify to him about a person, for he knew what was in people. Now there was a person...

John sets up Nicodemus as a picture of what it means to be human. And, Nicodemus knew enough about Jesus to be curious, or unsettled, or moved by some deep longing to get up and knock on the door:

Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs/miracles you are doing if God were not with him.

Now, that's not a bad confession of faith in the middle of the night. It certainly isn't negative or challenging or misguided. It seems to follow from what the gospels portray. Jesus is a gifted teacher and healer who came from God, but there must be something more than faith in the miraculous or the extraordinary. There must be something more.

In response Jesus launches into this wordy, mysterious answer about being born again, and born from above, and born of water and Spirit. And Nicodemus is rightly flustered. He's trying to figure out who Jesus is and Jesus answers with slippery words that sound like riddles. The last thing that Nicodemus says is, "How can this be?" Not really a ringing endorsement. I'm not sure that he slept any better....

But, let me draw your attention to one odd little line.

Jesus says:

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven ~ the Son of Man.

Jesus uses here an obscure idiom called "the prophetic past tense." He speaks of a future event as if it already happened. Jesus speaks of something coming with the confidence of something past.

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven ~ the Son of Man.

Jesus offers a sort of bookends to his life.

I came down from God. I am going back to God.

I descended from God. I am ascending to God.

While Jesus doesn't claim here to be of the same substance as God, he does suggest a relationship that is different than just being a teacher or a prophet. He positions himself as a kind of singular lynch pin between heaven and earth, between God and humanity.

Frederick Dale Bruner puts it this way:

If anyone wants sure commerce with the true God, Jesus is the sole authorized route.... Do you want clear knowledge of God in heaven? Listen to this Jesus on earth.... Do you want to go to God? Follow Jesus ~ he is the only one who has been there and knows the way back there. Let us not try to go up there by ourselves or by anyone else's instructions. Do not expect other heavenly visitations. Do not look for any heaven sent or heaven sending transportations. The space between God and human beings is filled by one person exclusively: Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Man and the One-and-Only Son of God, the sole mediator between God and human beings.

Big gulp...

That exclusive claim is enough to keep you up for nights without end.

In a multi-cultural, wonderfully-complex-diverse world, in a world with multiple expressions and experiences of the divine, in a world that is spiritual and religious, to claim that Jesus is the only one who knows the way to and from God is what makes Christianity appealing and universal and beautiful.

And it is what makes Christianity restrictive and exclusive and maddening. Some of you heard that quote and breathed a sigh of deep confidence and some of you winced and squirmed in your seats...

But! But, buried in that little line is the astonishing mystery that when we couldn't or wouldn't come to God, when we demonstrated time and time again that we were powerless to make our way back to God, when the night was too dark and the demons were too big, God came to us.

God sent not just a teacher, but God sent God's self.

God sent his Son ~ he knew the way to earth and he knew the way back to heaven. Amidst all that language about being born again, or born from above, the essential claim, it seems to me, is that God sent his Son to earth.

Now. You can believe in that. You can doubt it. You can rest in it. You can live out of it or lean into it. You can trust it. You can be completely befuddled by it. You can push against it. You can hope in it. You can take comfort in it. You can deny it. You can cling to it. You can run from it. You can stay awake and wrestle with it.

You may do all of those things at some time in your life. (I have.)
You may seem to hold all of those things simultaneously. (I do.)

But, I am not sure that what you do with it matters all that much.
For the gospel is that:

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

And that means that the motion, the wind, the birthing belongs to God. How we respond is some mix of experience, disposition, understanding, will, timing, culture, mystery, and divine action. The action is God toward us....

Dear friends, we are all Nicodemus. We all at some point ask, "How can this be?"
How can this be that God would send his Son toward me?
How can this be that I'm still stuck and struggling?
How can this be that a God who claims to love me would let this abuse continue?
How can this be that the followers of Jesus would oppress and demean others?
How can this be that I'm still searching and sleepless?
How can this be?
Nicodemus is an example of what it means to be human....

You know, there's no mention of what happened with Nicodemus that night. There is no record of what he thought as he walked back home in the dark. In fact, Nicodemus doesn't appear again until he assists Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of Jesus for burial. He brings the spices with which they anoint the body. He helps wrap the body in linen and lay it to rest.

Those are the gentle and generous things that we do for those whom we love.
Somehow Nicodemus came to love Jesus. Maybe on that sleepless night
Nicodemus learned that Jesus loved him first.

Dear friends, no matter what keeps you up at night.
You are loved by God in Jesus.
Jesus came from God ~ for you.
Jesus knows that way back to God ~ for you.
Thanks be to God.

Amen.