

Nicodemus and an Easter Faith  
Easter Sunday, 2009  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

First Reading      John 3:1-3  
Second Reading    John 19:38-42

“Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews ....”

So begins the third chapter of the gospel of John. This fellow named Nicodemus is one of the hundreds of characters we find in Holy Scripture. He appears only in the Gospel of John, where we encounter him on three separate occasions.

His story is one of a man who tries to make sense of the overwhelming, confounding, unimaginable news of God’s unconditional love. In that way, Nicodemus’ story is our story, too, the story of someone who is given a gift, a gift of such baffling wonderment that it threatens to redefine everything about him.

It is the gift of grace.

What does he do with such a gift?

Well, I invite you to see for yourselves as we walk together with this learned man of God ... all the way to the cross and the tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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As those opening words of John, chapter three, make clear, Nicodemus was a Pharisee.

So he took a mighty big risk when he came to Jesus in the scene that Jim introduced in our first scripture reading. He was, after all, a member of that special class of Jews, the teachers and defenders of the Law, the old covenant in its most traditional and strict reading.

No wonder that he came to Jesus by night. He knew of Jesus’ growing reputation, how he was teaching, preaching and performing signs and miracles that put the Hebrew God in an entirely new, unfamiliar and, for many, unwelcome light.

To be seen with Jesus could, at the very least, jeopardize Nicodemus' social and religious standing, if not get him kicked out of the club altogether. But Nicodemus *had* to come that night, even if it meant sneaking around in the dark, to ask, to try to understand the word from this man, who at the very least seemed to be knowledgeable teacher.

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above," Christ told him.

"How can these things be?" replied the confused Nicodemus.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son," responded Christ, "so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Scripture doesn't provide the details of how the two parted ways that night. But one can imagine that Nicodemus left in a befuddled state, perhaps his shoulders in a slump, wracking his brain to understand what it meant to be born from above, wondering if this man, Jesus, could really be the son of God.

Our second encounter with Nicodemus comes several chapters later. Jesus' ministry had gained momentum ... as well as the concern of the Pharisees. Word was spreading that Jesus *was* the messiah. As John portrays them, the chief priests and Pharisees needed to protect their authority. So they sent the temple police to arrest him.

But the police returned empty-handed, so amazed at what they had heard Jesus preach and teach that they dared not follow through on their orders.

Just as the chief priests are about to rush out at that point and arrest Jesus without reason, Nicodemus appears again and this time we learn he is a member of the Sanhedrin, the temple high council. He intercedes, saying that the law requires a fair hearing before an arrest is to be made. The chief priests back down, for the moment, leaving Jesus' ministry to continue.

So, we ask, had Nicodemus become convinced of Jesus' divinity and his message?

Or was he just being a careful lawyer, insisting that the Pharisees abide by their own laws of due process?

As with his first scene in the gospel of John, we are left without a clear answer.

Then comes the third time we encounter Nicodemus. Christ has been arrested, tried by the Romans, tortured and crucified. The sun is falling and, according to tradition, the body must be buried.

Joseph of Arimathea, whom John calls a disciple of Jesus, was a man of wealth and influence. He had gone to Pilate to ask permission to bury Christ's body.

But with him, of all people, is Nicodemus. And Nicodemus is hardly empty handed. He comes with the equivalent of 75 pounds of fragrant spices and lotions to treat Christ's body for burial. He and Joseph retrieve the body of our Lord, prepare it and lay it in a tomb that had never been used.

Now, we may think, *this* is a breakthrough for our man, Nicodemus.

After all, the spices and lotions were far more than what was needed for the task. Surely his unmistakably public act of retrieving Jesus' body from the cross and his extravagant expense on lotions and spices are evidence of a man who has come to believe.

He may not have gotten the message while Jesus walked the earth in the flesh, we might want to believe. But he made up for it in the honor that he gave Jesus in his burial.

Again, however, the evidence is inconclusive. We're left with only the facts.

Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea bury Christ as an act of homage, a tribute, a show of respect and faith.

Or, Nicodemus knew there would be no resurrection, so he brought an excess of burial spices to make sure the stench of the decaying body didn't escape the tomb. After all, he may have thought, this man Jesus caused enough trouble while he walked the earth in the flesh.

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Well, was Nicodemus a changed man or not?

Perhaps, just perhaps, we are never to know the final outcome because it is the process of coming to believe that is the point.

Perhaps Nicodemus appears in the Gospel of John so we can see ourselves in him.

Perhaps Nicodemus' struggle is our struggle – the challenge of understanding how our God came into the world to suffer and die for us, only to be resurrected that we all might be born again from above into eternal life.

That alone is a good word for us to hear this Easter morning, that the magnitude of God's love and grace should always be something that blows our minds, that exceeds our mortal understanding, a truth that will never be tamed or hi-jacked.

But maybe there is even more.

We have, you see, what the story of Nicodemus didn't have. We have the miracle of Easter morning.

Without that miracle, all of scripture is just a good story, full of interesting characters, like Nicodemus. With that miracle, however, the gospel becomes something else entirely, the good news that can never be contained.

Friends, I know that we at Caldwell work so extraordinarily hard to apply God's word in the world. We see so much need, so much hurt, so much injustice. God's word written and made flesh in Christ calls us to act.

I thank God every night for the privilege of being with you, in this part of the body of Christ, God's agency in the world. We have been given so much. We intend to do much with it for others, and we will. Of that I am certain.

But none of that, none of it, has purpose unless we have an Easter faith.

So on this Easter morning, let us simply give thanks to God ... a God who welcomes us when we come in the night with questions ... a God who transcends our earthly councils and courts ... a God who escapes humanity's efforts to contain him ... a God who doesn't need or ask for our burial customs.

On this Easter morning, let us simply open our hearts and receive the miracle of faith as a gift, not something that can be earned or learned or ever mastered ... only received and cherished.

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above," Christ said.

"How can these things be?" replied the confused Nicodemus.

“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.”

That is the miracle of the resurrection and how we deal with this overwhelming, confounding, unimaginable, tomb-opening, mind-blowing news of God’s love is more than enough to occupy us for all of our days.

Amen.