

## **John 3.1-17**

### **“Learning to Walk in the Dark”**

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

**He came to Jesus by night...”**

I admit it, I am afraid of the dark. I live in an old house that creaks and moans. I work in an old house that creaks and moans.

Occasionally, I get scared. I need light. At home, I have a lamp on a timer, so that there is always a light on when I come home in the evening. Nothing scares me more than entering a dark space. I also have a night light in the hallway to guide me when I get up in the night. It also takes the edge off the darkness. I also have a flashlight in my night stand, just in case. At work, I drive poor Michael nuts because I keep turning on the lights and forgetting to turn them off. I do not like the dark. I also struggle with the long nights of winter. I need the light.

A few years ago, I led a study on a book written by Barbara Brown Taylor entitled; “Learning to Walk in the Dark.” Brown Taylor explores

darkness from a variety of different perspectives. She invites her readers to learn how to see the light that is found in the dark. Our thought for the day comes from her book. She suggests that there is no light without first the darkness. A child grows in the dark of the womb. A seed grows in dark of the soil. New life through faith in Jesus comes only through the dark night of the tomb.

Barbara Brown Taylor has challenged my whole understanding of darkness. I have found some freedom to explore the darkness in my life, both physically and spiritually. For instance, I try not to immediately turn on the lights when I wake up in the middle of night after a bad dream. I have noticed that turning on the light only intensifies the darkness on the edges. We all know that the monsters live on the edges and under our beds. Oh, and sometimes in our closets – but that is another sermon.

When I visited my brother's new home on the shores of Lake Huron a couple of summers ago, I went out one night and sat on the

shore. It was a perfect evening. It was a clear night and there were lots of stars. It was amazing all the things I could see and hear. I sat there at first with all my fears whirling around inside of me. I resisted the urge to flee back to the house and the safety of the light. As I sat there, wrapped in the beauty of the night, I discovered that my fears eventually slipped away slowly one by one. It was a powerful experience. The Buddhists have a wonderful story about finding freedom by learning how to share a cup of tea with our fears.

Again, inspired by Barbara Brown Taylor's writing I have also started to be honest with people about my own struggles with depression. I have come to see depression as a form of spiritual darkness – a "dark night of the soul." I have lived with depression most of my life and occasionally I have felt like the darkness would swallow me up. I have tried to fight it on my own and keep it a secret which only intensified the darkness. Thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor, I have discovered that learning how to sit with others in the darkness helps to

take the fear away. Barbara Brown Taylor invites us to discover that learning to walk in the dark is an important spiritual discipline.

Given all this, I find it intriguing that the author of our text today from the gospel of John makes a point of saying that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. I wonder if there is any significance to that simple piece of information. Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus at night? The standard answer has always been that Nicodemus did not want his peers to know that he was going to see Jesus. It would be like he was fraternizing with the enemy. The other standard answer is that seeing Jesus at night would ensure a private conversation without the distraction of the crowds.

However, if one spends any time with the gospel of John, one discovers that it is not a simple book and rarely do standard answers apply. The author chooses his terms with great care. There is always more going on than one might perceive on an initial glance. John is not just telling us a story. He is also doing theology.

There is a deeper meaning to the fact that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. The author uses the word “night” seven times throughout the gospel. Three of them are directly connected to Nicodemus. The author always refers to Nicodemus as the one who came to Jesus at night.

It is fascinating to observe the deepening of Nicodemus’ faith throughout the gospel. In this passage, we meet a questioning Nicodemus. He comes to Jesus with questions. Despite all his training and learning as a Pharisee, a religious scholar, he cannot quite figure out what Jesus is all about. He struggles with the whole concept of being born from above. What Jesus is saying does not make sense to him. Nicodemus is in the dark. There is something more to this Jesus and so he learns to walk in the dark by facing his questions.

In the second reference, Nicodemus is cautioning his colleagues not to be so quick to judge this Jesus. Nicodemus is risking his reputation as a good Pharisee by defending Jesus. We see Nicodemus

gradually finding his way through the dark. In the final reference, we discover Nicodemus helping Joseph of Arimathea place Jesus in the tomb after his crucifixion. Nicodemus is a powerful example of the life of faith. He models for us a deepening discipleship that begins with questions and doubts but grows into a deep, life-changing relationship with Jesus.

All the other references to night in the gospel of John refer to a time of spiritual darkness. It is a time of uncertainty. In chapter eleven, we read; “but those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them. In chapter thirteen, we read; “So, after receiving the piece of bread, Judas immediately went out. And it was night.” After leaving that table Judas sets in motion the events that culminate in the crucifixion of Jesus.

In the gospel of John, the term “night” is a metaphor, much like the term wilderness that we explored last week. The night is a time of doubt and questioning, as it was for Nicodemus. It is also a time of

fear, despair and uncertainty. Like the wilderness, the night is also a place of spiritual discovery. It is a place of encounter with the Divine. The God who loves us is found in the wilderness and in the dark of night.

As we continue our journey through the season of Lent, the time of the lengthening of days, Nicodemus invites us to lean into the wilderness and to embrace the night. Nicodemus calls us to learn how to walk in the dark. Nicodemus admitted he did not understand. He confessed he was in the dark. His confession opened the door to the light. The journey of spiritual discovery begins when we can find the courage to admit we are in the dark.

My last conversation with my nephew Nathan before he died was a painful one. We had dinner at my hotel. I was returning home at the end of my sabbatical. Nathan was living on the streets of Edmonton. He had been in and out of treatment for alcoholism many times. I offered him a room in my house in Prince George. I offered to help him

find sobriety. He said, “Thanks, Uncle Rob, but I have got this covered. I can handle this.” He asked me to drop him off at a bar and I gave him some money. As he was leaving he said to me; “You know the best shelter in town is the wet one.” He died eight months later of complications related to alcoholism.

What are we afraid of? What do we think we can handle all by ourselves? What is it, when we say; “I have got this covered, Uncle Rob,” that in our hearts we know we haven’t a clue. Avoiding our fears only makes them grow stronger. Our inability to admit we do not have all the answers and that we need help can be fatal. Our fear of the dark can prevent us from the finding the light we need to live our lives fully with meaning. Nicodemus joins us today in our sacred circle and invites us to admit our fears and to follow him into the night, learning how to walk in the dark trusting that we are not alone. The one who neither slumbers nor sleeps walks with us into the night. **Amen.**