

Encounters with Jesus: Appointment after Dark

John 3:1-21

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Churches of Portland and Decatur, Indiana on February 5, 2017]

Introduction to the Series

Starting today and leading up to Easter, I will be presenting a series of sermons from the Gospel of John. The title of the series is “Encounters with Jesus.” The primary resource is the book, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*, by Frances Taylor Gench, professor of New Testament at Union Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia.

Before I read the scripture I’d like to make a few introductory comments about the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John: New Testament 101.

The first four books in the New Testament—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are called Gospels, literally “good news,” because they tell the story of Jesus, who the writers all believe to be the Son of God, the Christ (Messiah), the One sent by God to announce the coming of God’s kingdom and to offer his life on the cross in order to redeem the world from sin and death. The intent of each gospel is to convince the reader that Jesus is in fact the Christ sent by God.

The first three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—tell essentially the same story, but each with its own emphasis. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels (from a Latin word that means “see together”) because the view is similar.

You can put Matthew, Mark, and Luke beside one another in three columns and actually see how similar they are.

When you compare the Fourth Gospel, John, with the first three, you find profound differences. John was written much later than the Synoptic Gospels, and presents events in Jesus’ life in a different sequence, and includes a series of events and encounters that are unique to John.

Do you remember when you had “Show and Tell” in elementary school? John's Gospel is the opposite of "Show and Tell"...it is "Tell and Show."

In the Prologue (John 1:1-14), John tells us who Jesus is: the Word of God made flesh, sent to dwell among us and bring us God's life, the light of all people.

Like the Prologue to a Greek tragedy, this information sets the audience up to know things the characters in the story do not.

After this initial "Tell," the rest of the Gospel is "Show."

It shows us what happens when Jesus the Word made flesh encounters various individuals, each of whom reminds us of an aspect of our own lives.

These people include the woman at the well in John 4, the lame man by the pool in John 5, the woman caught in adultery in John 8, the man born blind in John 9, the raising of Jesus' friend Lazarus in John 11, the High Priest and Pilate in John 19, Mary Magdalene on the morning of the Resurrection in John 20, and today's lesson, John 3, Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night.

Each of these encounters shows us that in John's Gospel, it is a risky thing to be engaged in conversation with Jesus. It leads to a challenge and an opportunity for transformation.

John calls the miracles in these stories “signs”—signs that point beyond the event to Jesus' glory and power, and leave the reader with the task of deciding what it all means.

The typical thing American Christians ask about these stories is, did they actually happen? And the only good answer to that question is that **it is the wrong question.**

The better question is, what is the truth in these stories? That is, what do these ancient stories tell us about God's plan revealed in Jesus, what does it mean to believe in Jesus, what is the nature of eternal life, and how do these stories help us to experience the presence and power of Jesus in the here and now?

So with that brief introduction to the Gospel of John, let us begin today with Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus in John 3:1-21.

I

In Ernest Hemingway's short story, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," an old man sits in a Paris café late at night, alone, drinking brandy.

Two waiters speculate about why the old man is there, why he is alone, and why he won't leave.

One waiter is young and impatient. He wishes the old man would die, or at least go home.

"I wouldn't want to be that old," he says. "An old man is a nasty thing."

And he refuses to bring the old man another brandy.

The other waiter is older and more patient.

"Why did you not let him stay?" he asks. "I am of those who like to stay late at the café . . . with all those who need a light for the night" (*The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, pp. 379–383).

II

Hemingway's story reminds me of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night.

What is Nicodemus doing up at this hour?

Maybe he was studying the Torah.

Rabbis often stayed up late studying scripture.

Or maybe he was awake for the same reason so many of us are late at night:
he had so many things on his mind that he couldn't settle down.

Doctors frequently prescribe sleep medications such as Ambien for people whose minds race at night, whose thoughts are like fireworks that keep shooting off new displays from the center of the old ones.

I imagine Nicodemus' thoughts went something like this:

"I've heard he turned water into wine. They're saying he is the Messiah, the Son of God. I wonder if they're right, because how can he make wine out of water if he is not sent from God?"

"But if he is sent from God, why has he not studied with our rabbis? If he is sent from God, why is he critical of our practices? What does that say about us?"

So late at night,
 here comes Nicodemus,
 knock, knock, knockin' on Jesus' door.

Jesus opens the door and I can picture him standing in the glow of the oil lamps that light the room.

Nicodemus comes out of the darkness into the light, temporarily.

As I picture the scene, Jesus looks at Nicodemus expectantly.

Nicodemus falls into the trap we often do when we meet someone famous:
 we start babbling about how great we think they are.

"Rabbi, we all know you're a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren't in on it."
 (The Message)

Jesus was not easily taken in by flattery, so he cuts right to the chase.

"I know why you are here. You want to get into the kingdom of God, don't you?"

"Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it's not possible to see what I'm pointing to—to God's kingdom." (The Message)

The Greek word used here can be translated "born from above" or "born again."

Many of us are more used to the translation, "born again."

That was how Nicodemus heard it and he interpreted it in a literal sense.

"Born again? How can anyone be born after having grown old?

Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

III

Nicodemus is not the only one who prefers to understand "born again" in a literal sense.

Ever since Watergate felon Chuck Colson published his book Born Again, a lot of people understand being born again in an almost literal sense—

as a dramatic moment of repentance,

conversion,

and spiritual transformation.

Maybe you've had encounters with well-meaning Christians who asked you, "Are you born again?"

If you have had such encounters, how did you answer?

Seminary professor Alyce McKenzie tells about sitting at a tire store waiting for new tires to be installed on her car.

She was reading a magazine when she became aware that someone had sat down in the chair next to her. It seemed odd since she was in the middle of a row of empty chairs. Then the man put a leaflet in front of her that read, "How to be born again."

The man said, "Wouldn't you like to read something of more eternal significance than this magazine? Have you been born again?"

When she didn't answer immediately, he asked, "Well, have you?"

Alyce said,

"I'm glad you asked that question. I've been reflecting on Jesus' words to Nicodemus in John chapter 3 and I don't think Jesus means 'born again' as if it were some emotional lightning strike that once it's over, we speak of our salvation in the past tense, like, that's done, now I have that checked off my

to-do list. I think being born again calls for our participation, and I think it's a lifelong process."

At that the man shook his head as if to say "Geez, lady, it's a yes or no question. How hard is that?"

He took his tract and moved on.

William Sloane Coffin told of the privileged and proper Boston matron who, when she heard the words "you must be born again," reportedly sneered,

"When you are born in Boston, it's quite enough. You don't need to be born again"

Someone has quipped that "Are you born again?" is the most terrifying question you can ask a Presbyterian.

But Jesus does not hesitate to confront Nicodemus with that very question,

"Do you want to be born again, be born from above through the wind of God's Spirit?"

For Nicodemus, it's not such a simple question.

This is a man who spent his whole life immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures, trying to answer the question of who God is and what God expects of us.

Being born from above—what is that?

According to the Gospel of John, it is a gradual journey from night to day, from darkness to light.

It is a daily pilgrimage from belief as rote reciting of a creed to belief as opening the door to our hearts and letting Jesus in.

It is a daily process of flipping the card on the hotel door of our hearts that says to God "Please do not disturb" to "Please come in and help clean up our room."

What does God want to do through the power of the Holy Spirit at the depth of our lives, according to John's gospel?

Forgive our sins, for one thing.

For another, give us and the church the courage to live with joy and purpose for someone or something other than ourselves.

For yet another, give us peace and the assurance of eternal life.

Nicodemus, do you want to be born from above?

Come on, man, yes or no?

What are you afraid of?

IV

What do you think Nicodemus might be afraid of?

Do you want to know what I think he is afraid of?

The same thing a lot of us are afraid of—**losing control.**

Nicodemus likes to be in control.

He likes knowing who is righteous and who is a sinner,
what to eat and what not to eat,
with whom to associate and whom to label "unclean."

Face it: you like being in control; so do I.

One way to understand humankind's rebellion against God is that we chose to seize control away from our Creator.

Being reborn by God's Spirit means giving up control to a power greater than ourselves—

One who loves us and wants only the best for us.

Jesus compares being born from above to the action of the wind.

like the blowing of the wind,
 open to change and growth,
 even in your most deeply held convictions.

Being born anew means seeing the world as if for the very first time,
 being open to the newness and beauty and goodness all around you.

It means to love passionately—
 to love life and the beloved people God has given you to love,
 to love your nation,
 your city,
 your neighbors,
 the ones who need you,
 to love your children and your grandchildren,
 and above all, to love God with childlike wonder and grace.

And it is to trust God with your life,
 your future,
 whatever you are facing this morning—
 trust God completely,
 just as a newborn trusts completely in her mother and father.

V

This appointment after dark could be for Nicodemus the start of a life of deep faith and devotion to Jesus.

We don't really know what happens to Nicodemus after his late night encounter with Jesus.

I suspect he endured a lot more sleepless nights.

Nicodemus makes two more appearances in John's gospel.

One is in John 7:50 where he makes a halfhearted defense of Jesus to the other Pharisees.

The other is in John 19:38, after Jesus has been crucified and is dead.

Nicodemus brings 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes to help Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial.

As Nicodemus wraps Jesus' body with the spices,
I can imagine that the air around him is thick with regret.

Like the ending of the opera where the lovers,
separated for so long, reunite,
but there is no time left because one of them is dying.

Or like a Greek tragedy when the tragic hero realizes,
too late,
that he should have made a different choice.

All of us have had the experience of standing at the casket of a loved one and feeling overwhelmed by emotion.

If the relationship was loving, we say to ourselves,
"If only we had had more time."

If the relationship was distant and strained, we say to ourselves,
"If only we had had more time."

Unlike Nicodemus in John 19, we do have more time with Jesus.

There is still time to open our hearts to the wind of God's Spirit
and let Jesus rebirth us from above.

Now it is up to each of us to decide:

What will I do with his gracious invitation?

Amen.

Sources:

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Frances Taylor Gench, Encounters with Jesus, Studies in the Gospel of John (Westminster-John Knox Press, 2007), 19-28.

Alyce McKenzie, "Nicodemus' Non-Decision: Reflections on John 3:1-16," retrieved from <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Nicodemuss-Non-Decision-Alyce-McKenzie-03-14-2011?offset=2&max=1>