

Jesus through the Eyes of Nicodemus

Genesis 12:1-4a

John 3:1-21

“There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’”

“Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, ‘Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?’”

“Nicodemus, who had first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.”

What we know of Nicodemus’s way of seeing his world at the beginning of John’s Gospel is minimal. In the first place, we know that he was a Pharisee, an identifier that needs some serious rethinking in Christian circles. They are not the bad guys. “For the majority of Jesus’ Jewish audience,” writes Amy Jill Levine, New Testament Jewish scholar and our professor for the Second Hour, “the Pharisees would have been respected teachers, those who walked the walk as well as talked the talk.” They interpreted Torah with an eye to making it relevant for the world they lived in. To identify them in our own jargon, they were contextualists rather than originalists, liberals rather than conservatives. Still, they were “concerned with Sabbath observance, dietary regulations, ritual purity and promoting correct understanding and following of Torah.”

As a “leader of the Jews,” in the second place, we also know that Nicodemus was a member of the Committee of Seventy-One known as the Great Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin met during the day, a significant detail, and was the final authority on Jewish law. It could judge those who were accused, providing there were two witnesses, but it could not initiate arrests. According to a Jewish source, anyone who went against the ruling of the Sanhedrin would be put to death. Around 30 C.E.—close to the time of Jesus’ arrest—the Sanhedrin lost its authority to inflict capital punishment; and in 70 C.E., when the Temple was destroyed, the Sanhedrin ceased to exist. John’s Gospel was written twenty years later. But back in the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, Nicodemus both had power and had no power over Jesus. He could not arrest him, but once accused and arrested, he held the power of life and death over him.

In the third place, we know he came to Jesus by night. John even repeats this detail when he identifies Nicodemus later in the Gospel, signaling that night and darkness are never idle details for John. Those who turn to Jesus in John are those who come to the light; those who prefer the darkness are those who turn away. “Darkness becomes most intense,” Johannine scholar Raymond Brown writes, “when Jesus is handed over to death...; then John dramatically comments, ‘It was night.’” By telling us that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, I think John may be telling us two things: that he came not as a member of the Sanhedrin, who worked their work during the day; and also that he came as one predisposed to turn away from Jesus and as one inexplicably drawn to the light.

Then, in the third place, we have Nicodemus’ own words. “Rabbi,” he says, a title that was not used by Jews until about 200 C.E. Remember that John is writing in the last decade of the first century when the Jewish community was dividing over those who followed rabbi Jesus, an oral interpreter of the law, and those who followed the scribes and Pharisees, who were beginning to write down various and more systematic interpretations of Torah that we know today as the Talmud and the Mishna. And even though Nicodemus goes on to say that he and his fellow Pharisees know Jesus to be a teacher come from God, else how could he turn water into wine or claim that he would raise up the destroyed temple in three days, from the perspective of John’s community he is damning Jesus with faint praise.

Those are the hints we have about how Nicodemus saw Jesus. His lens was shaped by his contextual interpretation of Torah, his position of power and authority on the Sanhedrin and his ambiguous choice to come to Jesus at night. Like so many in John’s community, I imagine he had one foot in the synagogue and one foot in what was becoming the church. In response, Jesus sees Nicodemus better than he is, although I am predisposed to see Jesus as seeing in this way! Jesus assumes Nicodemus has come to him, Brown says, because he wants to enter the kingdom of God. Or to put the matter as John does in his prologue, Nicodemus’ coming to him in the night signaled his desire to live in the light that had come into the world in him. But to see Jesus as the light—to see that he had not come from God in the sense that he was approved by God, but in the unique sense of having descended from God’s presence to be light to the world—to see Jesus in this way, Nicodemus must be born from above. We all must be! “To all who received him,” John had already written, “who believed in his name, *he gave power* to become children of God, who were born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” Jesus is giving Nicodemus power to be born anew of God.

Nicodemus is having none of it. He wants to know how you can be born after having grown old: do you enter your mother's womb a second time? Perhaps Nicodemus was simply trying to fit Jesus into his way of knowing what he knows; but I am more inclined to think that he is mocking Jesus. It is what we do when we do not want to let the light of truth into the darkness we have preferred. Jesus persists, trying to give Nicodemus eyes to see in this exchange God's Spirit catching him up aloft and claiming him as God's own. The last thing Nicodemus says reminds me of Mary's words to Gabriel in Luke's Gospel. "How can this be?" With Mary, the mood is subjunctive, which is to say, "uncertain. It helps you tell... what might be," writer Michele Murano taught me. "[It] is the mood of mystery... of faith interwoven with doubt. It's a held breath, a hand reaching out... It's humility, deference, the opposite of hubris." With Nicodemus, the mood appears to be more indicative: the mood in speech used "for knowledge, facts, absolutes, for describing what's real or definite... The indicative helps you tell what happened or is happening or will happen in the future," Murano says, when you believe you know for sure what the future will bring. "How can this be?" Depending on how Nicodemus sees Jesus, his mood is either wide-eyed or close-minded.

Jesus' next response seems to leave Nicodemus in the dust. "Are you a teacher of Israel," he asks, "and yet you do not understand these things?" In other words, as a man immersed all of your life in the Scriptures and in the life of God's people, how can it be that you have not been born of the Spirit? Nicodemus is silent.

Therefore Jesus continues as though Nicodemus were not there because, for all intents and purposes, he is not. Jesus' words are now addressed to any who have been drawn out of their own separate darkness to the light he just might be. Twice he says that whoever believes in him—meaning, in John's Gospel, whoever follows him—will have life with God. He says that God has sent him not to deepen the divide between God and the world but to end the divide. Like Nicodemus, we must decide: Do we love the darkness more than the light? Do we prefer the real and definite lives we are leading without him or the whole new life with him of uncertainty and mystery, of faith interwoven with doubt, a held breath, a hand reaching out, humility and deference rather than hubris?

More and more I find myself thinking that Nicodemus is a place holder for each of us who come to Jesus by night; for any of us, from John's day onward, who want to keep one foot in things as they are and one foot in the future God is giving us in his Son. Something has drawn us to him and made us want to engage him. We fancy our reason and knowledge and understanding to be a match for him, as long as we see him as a teacher, a very, very good teacher; as long as we do not really believe that in him we are having to do with God. But the unsettling thing about this story is that in it Jesus is taking from Nicodemus the possibility of being neutral about the life that is truly life in him, taking away the option of qualifying the threat posed by the experience of light illuminating his darkness, taking away the hope that gradually over time we will decide for him rather than against him.

If you read ahead in the Gospel of John, you can only conclude that Nicodemus spent the next three years of his own life wondering what he had missed that night, wondering why he could not get his head (let alone his heart) around what Jesus meant, wondering about the truth he could not square with the facts. How many of us have spent years of our own life wondering the same thing about Jesus? I say this of Nicodemus because, in the middle of John's Gospel, Nicodemus suggests to the Sanhedrin, at some risk to his reputation, that Jesus be given a hearing before he is judged by them. Maybe Nicodemus was that kind of fellow all along and that is why he sought Jesus out in the first place. Or maybe Jesus got under his skin just enough that, even though he could not leave his old self behind that night, neither could he see Jesus the way he used to see him before that night.

The last time Nicodemus appears in John's Gospel, it is at the foot of the cross. "Nicodemus," John reminds us, "who had first come to Jesus by night," now comes to Jesus before night had fallen on the Jewish Day of Preparation, carrying a hundred pounds of spices, so that he, with Joseph of Arimathea, might bury Jesus' body.

On the second level of the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence, the sight of Michelangelo's Pieta moved me to stop and stay as I beheld the perfectly chiseled figure of Nicodemus in old age holding the dead body of Christ. His face is the face of Michelangelo, the Pieta the artist's gravestone. Apparently there was a group known as the Nicodemites in 16th century Italy, Catholics who secretly sympathized with the Reformed theological turn toward justification by faith alone and who were also afraid to come out in the light of day against the Roman church. Michelangelo was in that number, some believe. I stand and stare at the eyes of an old man whose death is not far off, the eyes of a man who dwells now in the valley of the shadow. Yet as I look again, I see in those eyes the eyes of an old man seeing as if for the first time, born from above, holding by the strength of his hand in life the one in whose hand his own soul and ours will be kept from falling in death. Thanks be to God. Amen.