

Sermon
Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 14, 2021

This gospel message today appears to be the second half of a night's conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. So with some imagination I'm going to tell you a story of how Jesus and Nicodemus might have passed their time together. Remember Nic arrived under cover of the dark to seek out Jesus and talk to him and ask questions. He's not just your average rabbi at the Temple; he is a leader of the Jews, someone with authority, knowledge and depth of understanding – or at least it seems he should. But he is floundering and Jesus, this radical rabbi, has “something” and Nicodemus is curious. He is ready to find out more.

It may have gone like this:

It was the end of the day and work at the temple and on the streets of Jerusalem had been demanding. It seemed to be more so every day. Jesus had had a light dinner and was just settling into a comfortable chair with a glass of wine. The sun had set and shadows were just becoming one with the darkness. As he had just put up his feet and looked into the warming fire, as the spring nights were still chilly, took a deep breath and relaxed into the evening that he heard a knock on the door. He answered and there stood his colleague from the Temple, more than that, a leader.

“Nicodemus, what are you doing here? It's late; you should be home with your family.” Nic replied, “Well, yes, I suppose so but the kids are in bed and my wife is just chatting with some of the women in the neighbourhood. It was a good time to go for a bit of a walk. But I really wanted to talk to you.”

And so, Jesus invited him into the place where he was staying, poured Nic a glass of wine, offered him the comfy chair and pulled up a kitchen chair for himself. They talked way into the night of things that puzzled Nic, which challenged his way of understanding the God of his people and his life of faith in these crazy times.

They settled in the room making small talk. There was so much comfort with Jesus, right now right here. Jesus was listening to him, 100%, not distracted by anything. He felt so safe. He felt so whole. It dawned on him that this was why the people crowded around Jesus wherever he went. Jesus didn't care who they were, they were all safe with him. Better than safe even! Valued, cared for, respected, healed and forgiven. Truly, this teacher was from God, there was no other explanation. He was a very unique rabbi at the temple; in fact it wasn't an easy place for Jesus to be for there was lots of judgement and harassment from the others there.

They spoke of rebirth, of the Spirit, how it blows where it will, not determined by a bunch of priests and rabbis. That when releasing yourself into the breath, riding the currents of spirit from above, becoming one with the spirit, you experience the kingdom of heaven. "But you have to let go, Nic let go of the judgment, fear, and stuff that others think you should be or do."

After a few hours, it was fully dark outside. The streets were quiet. The whole world seemed asleep and settled but for Nic's heart and mind. His head in his hands he asks Jesus, "How can these things be?" And Jesus replies, "My dear man, friend and colleague, are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" The question hung there. There was no meanness or judgement. But Nicodemus knew that he had missed something really important.

And they continued to talk deep into the night, of their week, how things were at the temple, the Roman occupation, the state of the economy, of friends and family. Eventually returning to the real purpose of Nic's visit, they talked of the ancient scriptures. Rabbi talk.

Jesus, paused, thinking of the conversation that started earlier in the evening. How Nic was really struggling with who he was in the midst of this everyday world and the Kingdom of God, which seemed so elusive.

Breaking the silence and bringing Nic's attention back to the room Jesus said, "Remember the story of Moses and the snakes, how God was so frustrated with our impatient, obstinate, thick headed ancestors that he sent poisonous serpents to plague them?" Nic looked at him questioningly, "Yes, of course I know the story." Jesus went on, "Moses then prayed to God on behalf of his people and God told him to make a bronze serpent, put it on a pole so that anyone

who is bitten can look at it and live. Well, they had to look at their problem face on, Nic. They had to first acknowledge God, who was their God, (and our) God and then lift their faces to the source of their affliction, the poisonous serpents.

It is a darkness to face the truth of our brokenness. When we face it though, my friend, we can begin to wrestle and defeat those demons and become new again – reborn so to speak. And it will happen again and again. But that’s okay you are loved so deeply by the God of our ancestors, Creator of the Cosmos.”

“Nic, listen; ‘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.’”

Hmmm, Nic thought.

It was now in the early morning hours that Nic was feeling different; he was feeling somehow more alive than he had in a long time. Funny, when normally he would have been sound asleep and if one of the kids woke him at this hour he was just groggy and so tired. What was going on here? What had changed? He and Jesus were just having this great conversation. Admittedly Jesus was saying some pretty radical things, but then he did radical things too. How was it that in the middle of the night it was just good news, so life affirming? It felt as if he was going through the dark to a new place. What did this mean?

Jesus continued, “God SO loved the world, do you really understand that Nic? God loves more than we can even wildly imagine. And he loves the whole cosmos, the stars in the heavens and ants that crawl at our feet, the animals that feed us, and those who live in the wilds beyond, the fish in the sea, every blade of grass and flying bird; the rocks in the desert and every leaf on the trees. God loves you and me, our brothers and sisters in far places for we are made in God’s image, made of love.”

“Nic, God makes present here and now the Son, so that all who believe in him have life – as fully as God created, intended for humanity. You really have to believe *into* God, Nic.”

Nicodemus rubbed his eyes, gave his head a bit of a shake. Things were starting to get fuzzy, what did he mean believe *into*. Sounds something like that being born again stuff, and a few hours ago that was pretty clear – or at least he thought so.

Jesus, seeing Nic's confusion went on. Nic, in time you will see again the death and darkness that exists in our human community and how people can be so attracted to that, attracted to the stuff that judges, destroys, dismisses, hurts, tears down. You will hear "Crucify Him, Crucify him." When in time you meditate on the cross, gaze upon it, sit at its feet, ponder its reality, you will be looking at the result of human contempt for God's gifts, those gifts of kindness, healing, goodness and all of creation. But it is also the place where the light breaks through, where we can face the truth of our brokenness and turn to live the truth of God's gifts in us and the Cosmos. Then we are enveloped, immersed, surrounded by the light. All of creation, including you and me is whole in the light that is God, that is love.

Jesus was quiet. Pondering what he had said, wondering if it had been at all helpful to this man who carried so much in his heart and mind. There was so much pressure out there in the streets, in the market and even the Temple to conform; to give in to all the earthly temptations that seemed so right, so important but left people empty and in deep pain. He saw it every day. There was so much suffering.

Nic was also quiet.

"I'd better be off Jesus. I've kept you up way too late, and tomorrow, or rather today will be another busy day I'm sure. Thank you for the wine, your time and conversation. I feel, different than when I arrived last night, I feel, well, somehow more whole. Shalom Jesus."

"You're welcome, Nic, it was good that you came over, I really enjoyed our conversation as well. Shalom Nic, go in peace."

Jesus opened the door and watched Nicodemus slowly walk down the still quiet street. Soon there would be the hustle and bustle of people going to work, about the busyness of daily life, about making a living and a life. Jesus took a long, deep breath of cool morning air, and as he

slowly released it he looked past the silhouette of Nicodemus and into the soft pink light of breaking dawn.

Shalom. Amen