

In the Dark – in the Light

When St. John writes that Nicodemus comes to Jesus “by night” – some would say that this is just a fact – that it was dark, that it was after the sun had gone down. And it was. It WAS night.

Some even suggest that Nicodemus purposely comes at night – that he’s sneaking around – not wanting his fellow Pharisees to know that he’s hanging out with this Jesus fellow. And there may be some truth to that as well.

However, John in his Gospel, doesn’t use “darkness” and “light” haphazardly. For instance, after Judas agrees to betray Jesus and leaves the upper room – John tells us that “it was night.”

Again, no doubt it was dark outside – but remember how John’s Gospel begins. “In Him [Jesus] was life, and the life was the LIGHT of men. The LIGHT shines in the DARKNESS, and the DARKNESS has not overcome it.”

Jesus, the Light of the world – is sent into this world of darkness – and while the darkness cannot overcome the Light – neither does the world comprehend this salvation that God has sent. God the Father sends His Son for the salvation of the world – but Judas, and Nicodemus, and the whole world, are still “in the dark.”

Who is this Nicodemus? We are told that he is “a man of the Pharisees ... a ruler of the Jews. We are not told why he comes – just as we are not told whether he comes on his own behalf, or on behalf of the Pharisees. But when he comes, he says to Jesus – “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

It doesn’t sound like Nicodemus is “in the dark,” does it? He sounds like one who is “in the know” – who has everything figured out. “WE” he says, no doubt referring to his fellow Pharisees – “WE KNOW” how this righteousness and salvation business works.

WE KNOW who God is with, and who He is not with. WE KNOW that He is with you because of the miracles that you do.

WE KNOW that He is with that person because he's successful – and with that one because of his good works – and with that one because of his philanthropy – and with that one because he's sooooo spiritual.

And WE KNOW that God is not with that foreigner, or that leper, paralytic, or demon-possessed one. WE KNOW that God is not with those who are Unrighteous – the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the “unclean” sinners. WE'VE got it all figured out, Jesus ... WE KNOW.

Just before John introduces Nicodemus to us in our text for today – he tells us that Jesus knows what is “in a man.” It may be dark, but Jesus knows what is “in Nicodemus.” HE KNOWS that Nicodemus is just like all the other children of Adam – that he is by nature sinful and unclean.

Jesus knows that ALL of us are by nature spiritually dead, blind, and enemies of God. That “all our righteous acts are as filthy rags.” That, “out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” – and the like. Jesus knows that ALL of us are – by nature – “in the dark.”

Like Nicodemus and the rest of the Pharisees, we look to ourselves and our good deeds as the reason why we should be righteous in God's eyes. But all who look to themselves for righteousness are living in the dark. Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

And now we see that Nicodemus doesn't have everything figured out. “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” Wise, old Nicodemus – a teacher and ruler of Israel – appeals to his reason, and it gets him nowhere – he's still in the dark.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Flesh gives birth to flesh, Nicodemus – and if you keep looking to your flesh – you'll get what it has to offer – sin and death.

But, “that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” – and the Holy Spirit always directs you to the One whom the Father has sent into the world for the salvation of sinners.

Just as “Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.” The sinful rebellion of God’s people of old brought poisonous snakes into the camp – their sin brought death. But with death all around, a bronze snake was lifted up on a pole – and God promised that all who looked to the snake would not die, but live.

In the same way the Lord has promised salvation for you – a salvation that does not come from within you – but comes from outside of you. He sends the Light of life into the world – to drive out darkness and death. He lifts up His Son on the pole of the cross so that “whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

That which is born of the Spirit is spirit. You have been “born again” by “water and the Spirit” in Holy Baptism. The Holy Spirit given to you in Baptism creates a faith in you that looks not to self – but outside yourself, to Christ – for your salvation.

That same Holy Spirit continues to shine the light of the Gospel into your life – turning you from your sin that leads to the darkness of death – and bringing you into the Light of Christ and His forgiveness.

It is for Judas, for Nicodemus – FOR YOU and the whole world – that Christ has come, to be lifted up as the sacrifice for sin – to deliver you from your bondage to sin, and to declare you to be righteous before God your heavenly Father.

“WHOEVER believes in Him HAS eternal life.” May God the Holy Spirit create and sustain such a faith in you, throughout all your days. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.