

Nick at Night

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Genesis 12:1-4, Psalm 121, Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, [John 3:1-17](#)

Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. That is the first thing that we are told about him after his introduction as a Pharisee and a Jewish leader.

And I know that people have traditionally read a particular meaning into that. Most every commentary and interpretation of this passage I have read assumes that Nick came under the cover of darkness because he didn't want anyone to know of his interest in Jesus or his teaching. They invite us to imagine him hiding his face behind his cloak and looking over his shoulder, deathly afraid that someone might see him.

I Don't Agree

But I don't agree. I don't think that the gospel writer is saying that Nick was frightened or embarrassed to be seen with Jesus. (You don't mind if I call him Nick, do you? We're going to be talking about him a lot.) Nick has no particular reason to be embarrassed at this point in the story. No, the meaning of his nocturnal visit is simpler than that. It has a symbolic meaning and is related to one of the most important ideas in this gospel – the idea of the darkness and the light.

The Gospel is telling us that Nick is in the darkness. He may think that he understands the truth, but he does not. He is on the wrong track. And Jesus is about to correct him. Indeed, Nick is so much in the dark that he will not be able to understand the truth when Jesus lays it right out in front of him.

Contrast with Story in Next Chapter

Next week we will read from the next chapter of this Gospel in which Jesus will have a similar conversation with someone else: a woman at a well. That encounter will take place at the brightest time of day, which is a clear symbol to us that she is much closer to the truth and more open to the truths Jesus declares.

But Nick? Nick comes at night. Nick may have studied and taught the scripture. He may have been given an honoured position as leader of his people, but he is in the dark when it comes to understanding who Jesus is, and what his coming is all about.

Are We Like Nick?

And that is something that we all need to pay close attention to today. Because there is a danger, a very real danger, that we may be like Nick. We, too, may be coming to Jesus here today in the night. We, too, may be lost in confusion concerning what Jesus is all about.

In particular, I myself may be in the most danger. For I, among us all, am most like Nick. I have studied the scriptures and have presumed, like him, to teach others about them. I have dared to take a position leading God's people. This story is prompting me to ask, "Am I coming to Jesus in the night as well?"



Nick at Night

An Opening Statement

Nick comes to Jesus at night with what is obviously a well-thought-out opening statement. **“Rabbi,”** he says, **“we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.”**

That opening statement shows us exactly what is important to Nick on this night. He is obsessed with the question of authority. He has been trying to work out whether Jesus has the authority to teach what he had been teaching and do what he has been doing. He is seeking confirmation that Jesus has indeed come from God.

Now, to be clear, that is a valid concern. Of course, it matters that Jesus has come from God. It matters that Nick has decided he believes that, and it matters what we believe about Jesus too.

Wrong Priorities

But Nick has come at night. Have I made that point clear to you yet? And that means that he is not coming with the right priorities in mind. Yes, it matters what you believe about Jesus, but Nick has missed a crucial step.

And so, Jesus cuts him off. He doesn't respond at all to the concerns that Nick is raising. Instead he changes the subject. Why does he do that? Well, obviously, because Nick has come at night.

He is fumbling around in the darkness and doesn't even know what he is dealing with. He thinks that what really matters is questions of authority and where Jesus' teaching comes from. But Jesus wants to let him know that something else comes first. That is why Jesus interrupts him.

Born from Above

“Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus says, **“no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”** Jesus is telling him what matters, what comes first. But Nicodemus is so much in the dark that he totally misunderstands what Jesus is saying.

This Gospel was written in Greek. And the Greek word that Jesus uses there is *ἀνωθεν*, which means “from above.” Jesus clearly means that someone needs to have a new birth that comes from God, from heaven above.

A Misunderstanding

But did I mention that Nick came to Jesus at night? He is so totally in the dark that he can't understand the plain meaning of what Jesus says. Rather than understanding that Jesus is telling him that he needs to change his entire life with a new orientation that comes from God, he becomes obsessed with the question of *how*. He wants to know what he has to do to obtain this new beginning.

Now, the word that Jesus used, the word *ἀνωθεν*, also had a secondary meaning. It could also mean “anew,” in the sense that we might say that someone was made over from top to bottom. And so, Nick, floundering around in the dark, completely misunderstands Jesus' meaning and assumes that he is saying that he needs to be born *again*.”

And that is why his comeback is to say that what Jesus is suggesting is simply impossible. It can't be done. **“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?”** And so Nick misses the point. He concentrates on the *method* of obtaining entrance into the kingdom and discovers that he can't do it.

Two Problems

And so, Nick represents the two main stumbling blocks that, to this very day, get in the way of those of us who are in the darkness. The first problem we have is that we become concerned with questions of correct belief about Jesus, and the second is that we get sidetracked by questions of how we obtain that birth from above.

When we come to Jesus at night, we will get sidetracked by arguments over what we believe about Jesus. Is Jesus the Son of God? What was the nature of his birth, his life, his resurrection? How do we define the relationship between the Father and the Son? These are, of course, all important questions. But they are also questions that we will never understand completely or logically. We will never all conceive of the answers in perfect unison.

Believing the Right Things

But, in the darkness, we make the mistake of thinking that believing all the right things about Jesus in the right ways is what it means to believe in Jesus. But it does not. When we reduce faith to a question of accepting a number of intellectual propositions, we only end up arguing, like Nicodemus, over questions of where Jesus came from and how. We will never arrive that way at the birth from above.

And I believe that that is exactly what the church has been getting wrong almost from the beginning. We have become obsessed with the questions of what we are supposed to believe.

Battles Over the Trinity

In the third century and especially the fourth, the church literally split itself in two over the question of what people believed about the nature of the relationship between the Father and the Son and how to reconcile that to Greek Philosophy.

And I mean that literally. There would be riots in the streets of Alexandria over the question of whether the Father and the Son shared the same substance or had a similar substance.

And again, to be clear, it does matter what the relationship is between Jesus and God. It matters to our salvation. But do you know what matters more than that? It matters that you experience God in Jesus Christ and that that changes your life. You can have all the “correct” formulations of the nature of the Trinity in the world, it will not matter unless you have that encounter with God first, and you have it through Jesus.

Divisions

But what have we done again and again throughout the history of the church? We have divided and condemned fellow believers over questions of correct belief. You name it, we have condemned people over it: the date of Easter, what actually happens during communion, when and how to baptize, how scripture is inspired and how the church should be governed.

That is by no means an exhaustive list. We have argued over the correct belief about just about everything in the life of the church. That is what you do when you come to Jesus at night. You fumble around in the dark over things that you will can never entirely grasp hold of.

Perhaps we think that if only we can come up with the list of all the correct things that you are supposed to give your intellectual assent to, that will be the thing that brings us out of the dark and into the light of day. It does not work like that. You can believe all the right things intellectually. That alone will not give you access to the kingdom of God. That is what Jesus is saying to Nick at night.

The Question of How

So, what will? And *how* is it to be done? That is the next question that Nick turns to. If what is needed is birth from above, he wants to know how.

And the church, lost in the night, has often obsessed over the same question. We have not been quite as ridiculous about it as Nick. We have not tried to put people back into their mothers' wombs to come out again, but we have piled on certain expectations of what you are supposed to do.

The church, floundering around in the night, has said that you have to be baptised just right, receive the sacraments in the right way, confess just right, give the right testimony in church, or say the right prayer with the right kind of sincerity. And the list of requirements that we have piled on people goes on and on.

Getting First Things First

Now, such actions matter – of course they do. They are natural and important parts of a balanced Christian life. But Jesus is telling Nick at night that it is not the doing of these things alone that gives the birth from above. In fact, they really accomplish nothing if you don't get first things first.

So, we all have the same tendency as Nick does when he comes to Jesus at night. We give priority to the wrong things. We make it all about correct belief and correct methods to get us into God's kingdom. But those are all secondary things. It is all about being born from above.

Jesus Makes it Simple

And how does that happen? We, in our darkness and in the night, want to make it so complicated like Nick. But Jesus makes it simple. He tells Nick and us what it is all about. It works, he says, just like the bronze serpent worked in the desert. **“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”**

In that story, when the Israelites were dying in the darkness of the wilderness, they were saved by the bronze serpent. And what did they have to do to be saved? Did they have to adopt particular intellectual beliefs about the serpent? No. Did they have to go through particular rituals or prayers? No.

They simply had to look upon the serpent with trust. That is all. Simple trust is all that Jesus asked for too. **“That whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”**

Coming in the Day

You see, because we come at night, because we have given in to the darkness and the suspicion that goes with it, we miss the simple truth. The one thing that Jesus really wants to know from us is simply this: Will you trust me?

So will you come to Jesus in the light of day? Will you lay aside the ways of the night and come with open trust? This is the promise he gives to all, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him – everyone who looks upon him with simple trust – may not perish but may have eternal life.**

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world – And certainly not so that we would be torn apart one from another with our arguments – but in order that the world might be saved through him.”