

We come, carrying our questions, our fear, our suspicion.

We come, bearing fresh wounds and aged scars.

We come, because we heard that Jesus might be here.

We come as we are. Who will welcome us in?

John 3:1-17 - adapted from The Voice translation

Narrator: *Nicodemus was one of the Pharisees, a man with some clout among his people. Curious about Jesus' mission, but afraid of where his questions might lead, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, under the cloak of darkness, to question Him.*

Nicodemus: *Teacher, some of us have been talking. You are obviously a teacher who has come from God. We recognize the mighty deeds You are doing as witness to the presence of God with You.*

Narrator: *At this time, Israel's Roman occupiers have given a small group of religious leaders, the Sadducees and the Pharisees, limited powers to rule, and Nicodemus is one of the Pharisees. He holds a seat on the ruling council known as the Sanhedrin, and surprisingly Nicodemus is among those who seek Jesus for His teaching.*

Jesus: *I tell you the truth: only someone who experiences birth for a second time can hope to see the kingdom of God.*

Nicodemus: *I am a grown man. How can someone be born again when he is old like me? Am I to crawl back into my mother's womb for a second birth? What are you saying?*

Jesus: *I tell you the truth, if someone does not experience water and Spirit birth, there's no chance they will make it into God's kingdom. Like from like. Whatever is born from flesh is flesh; whatever is born from Spirit is spirit. Don't be shocked by My words, but I tell you the truth. Even you, one so educated and respected among your people, must be reborn if you are to truly see. The wind blows all around us as if it has a will of its own; we feel and hear it, but we do not understand where it has come from or where it will end up. Life in the Spirit is as if it were the wind of God.*

Nicodemus: *I still do not understand how this can be.*

Jesus: *Your job is to instruct your people in matters of faith, but you do not comprehend the life of the Spirit? I tell you the truth: my friends and I speak about the things we know, and we give evidence about the things we have seen, and you choose to reject the truth of our witness.*

If you do not believe when I talk to you about ordinary, earthly realities, then heavenly realities will certainly elude you. No one has ever journeyed to heaven above except the One who has come down from heaven—the True Human, who is of heaven. Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. In the same way, the True Human must be lifted up; then all those who believe in Him will experience everlasting life.

For God demonstrated their love for the world in this way: Creator sent their Chosen One, that whoever trusts in them will not face everlasting destruction, but will have everlasting life. Here's the point. God didn't send The One into the world to judge it; instead, The One is here to rescue the world from self-destruction.

Tension:

Leader: Why can't you see clearly?

People: **Because the night is long and the mysteries are deep.**

Leader: Why can't you see fully?

People: **Because we are only human, tied to our limited understanding.**

Leader: *What can you see?*

People: **We see the realm of God, because we are being born from above.**

Promise:

Leader: Our vision is partial and dim. Yet the Spirit calls us to the deeper sight of love.

Creator God, you are the source of Life, the origin of wisdom, the wellspring of understanding. We have come here looking for something--guidance, inspiration, knowledge, maybe, revelation. Hear us seeking, asking, knocking, and show us your way.

Amen.

Proverbs 3:5-6 -

*Trust YHWH with all your heart,
and don't rely on your own understanding;
acknowledge God in everything you do,
and God will direct your paths.*

I heard that verse often in my childhood. Usually the King James version:

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.

"Lean not on thine own understanding." That's always been a problem for me. I'm kinda attached to mine own understanding.

This verse reminds me of a [line from a 90's movie](#), where the FBI director talks down to his field agent--"you're on a need-to-know basis, and you don't need to know"

That was definitely part of my worldview at the time. God was up here with all the answers and the big picture view, and my role as a puny human was to shut up and stick to the plan. Follow orders--because I can't possibly understand the plan.

I had a Bible professor at my Evangelical college tell our class full of second-year theology students that we were not to question what he taught us, just to learn it. He said that after we had learned the basics from him, there would be plenty of time to explore our questions when we got to seminary.

Hmmm, I'd like to think that he meant well, but still... That'll leave a mark.

So I've got some baggage when it comes to this story of Jesus and Nicodemus.

One way of reading this story is to see it as a condemnation of Nicodemus' "leaning on his own understanding."

When the conversation begins, Nic is confident in his knowledge--"Rabbi, we know you're a teacher come from God...the work you do is only done through the power of God." He comes in with confidence, sure that he's read the evidence correctly.

But, in this reading, Jesus challenges his knowledge--you think you know, but you don't. You can't, because you're not born from above.... How can you call yourself a teacher when you can't even understand what's happening right in front of you?

Ouch. After that, Nic is shamed into silence as Jesus carries on teaching with metaphors and references that continue to defy simple explanations to this day.

This way of reading the story frames the encounter as a debate, a contest between teachers. Jesus dominates with clever rhetoric and Nicodemus slinks away with his Pharisaic tail between his legs. *He tried to lean on his own understanding, and so he couldn't acknowledge God when he was standing right in front of him.*

That's how the story is usually read, and I've probably preached it that way myself a time or two.

So I was intrigued when I stumbled onto a different reading of the story this week, in the book [Holy Envy by Barbara Brown Taylor](#).

Let's start back at the beginning, with the setting of the story. This conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus happens at night. Now, right away, that has most of us thinking *scandal!* This faith leader is up to something. Either he's too ashamed to show his interest in Jesus during the day, or he's worried about his reputation, doesn't like the optics of lending this revolutionary credibility with an official meeting.

But the text doesn't say any of that directly. Perhaps there's a more generous way of understanding the motivation for an evening meeting. These were both busy, popular teachers--perhaps an after dark scenario was the only opportunity for a private conversation.

Or perhaps this was simply less formal--as Brown Taylor says, sometimes nighttime is *"a better time to talk about things that matter.... Sometimes darkness is a perfect blanket for conversations you cannot have in the broad light of day."* (p163)

So, let's not start with the assumption that a meeting in the shadows of night is automatically a negative.

Now, I hope that some of you who were here and paying attention last week just felt at least a tiny little flicker of recognition...

Shadows are not a bad thing. The shadow is a place of honesty, of awareness, a space that points us to the light of our true selves and reveals the image of God in us. God is not afraid of our dark spaces, and moving into the darkness can move us towards God. (Here I'll recommend another Barbara Brown Taylor book, [Learning to Walk in the Dark](#). Definitely check that out as well if you're curious about the positive aspects of darkness.)

I'll have more to say about the shadow work in a minute....

For now, assuming that darkness is not inherently shameful, let's think the best of Nicodemus. Let's take him as he presents himself in the text, as someone who knows some things but has come to a teacher with honest questions.

Here again, we think we know how this scenario is supposed to go. The student asks the teacher a question, and the teacher responds with some kind of lesson pertaining to the question, dispensing their wisdom and enlightening the student.

But no, Jesus cuts Nicodemus off before he can even get a question out. Nic starts off with something he thought would be agreeable--"We recognize you as one sent from God." But instead of being flattered, Jesus wrong-foots him-- "Well actually, how would you even know the work of God if you saw it?"

Caught off guard, Nic stumbles and sputters, and Jesus keeps up the rhetorical advance. He exposes Nic's ignorance, then turns it around and asks Nic to explain why he doesn't know as much as he should.

This looks like it's going really badly for Nicodemus. As Brown Taylor writes,

"When the teacher asks you a question, you are supposed to give the right answer, for which you will get points, or strokes [to your ego] or both--the explicit and implicit rewards of knowing the right answer.

But what if Jesus is not that kind of teacher? What if his purpose is not to enlighten Nicodemus but to endarken him...?" (p166)

Wait a second...that's not what Nic wanted from this encounter--and it's not what we want from Jesus either! That's not what I prayed for at the start of this sermon--we want God to meet our asking with answers, to respond to our seeking with guidance on the way.

Why would Jesus want to endarken rather than enlighten someone?

Although, now that you mention it, that does seem to be the outcome of a lot of Jesus' teaching... How many times do people walk away from his parables shaking their heads in confusion rather than signing up for his next class? And Jesus seems to be okay with that, actually.

At times, perhaps most of the time, Jesus' objective does not seem to be giving a straight answer or resolving confusion. Much of the time, Jesus seems to be trying to raise more questions, leaving the questioners with riddles and paradoxes. With Nicodemus, Jesus does seem intent on leading him deeper into the darkness.

Which is interesting. Because Nic had answers. He knew his Torah, he knew the history and the traditions, he had his systematic theology down pat.

What he didn't seem to have was the *pneuma*, the wind, the breath, the Spirit of the thing.

Reading from Barbara Brown Taylor again:

'The wind blows where it chooses,' [Jesus] says to Nicodemus, 'and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.' This is not a judgment. It is a statement of fact, as you can tell from the very next thing Jesus says. 'So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

Everyone. Nicodemus is not a special case. No one knows where the Spirit comes from or where it goes. No one. The only thing that sets Nicodemus apart is that he is so uncomfortable with his unknowing. His problem is that he thinks that he ought to know." (p167)

He thinks he ought to know.

That sounds enough like me that I'll step into the role of Nicodemus and claim this as my story for a while. Like I said, I have some baggage in this department.

Last week I referenced the psychology of the shadow self, from Carl Jung, which came to me through the Catholic friar Richard Rohr. This concept says that we all have personas or masks that we've built to hide the shadow side of our personality.

"Knowledge" is part of my mask. I have spent almost my whole life trying to become a person who knows things. There are very few conversations where I won't at least pretend to know something significant about whatever is being discussed.

And if I do stumble into a conversation that I know little about, I've developed slick little lines like, "that's just so far outside of my area that I don't even know what to ask." Which implies that A) I really do have an "area" of some kind and B) I am curious about your area, if you can convince me that your area is worth my knowing about. (So that flips the pressure back onto you! So tricky!)

Knowledge is my mask and my safety blanket. This pulpit is like a shield--it earns me the benefit of the doubt with a lot of people as though I'm some kind of expert. And if that fails, I can retreat to my office space which is heavily insulated with bookshelves.

I want you to be impressed by my knowledge. On the flip side, then, that persona of "someone who knows" is hiding my deep discomfort with not knowing. My shadow is ignorance, inexperience.

I carry some deep emotional scars from my childhood around not knowing things.

Growing up on the farm, we often had hired hands in their late teens and early twenties working with us. These guys were awesome, in my book, but I could never keep up with them in the work or in the conversations. My older brother could, and that made it worse.

I remember feeling like they were always laughing at me. I don't know if they were or not, I probably didn't even register to them. But it felt like I was being laughed at because I didn't know what they knew, I didn't know how to do the things they could do.

I had similar wounds at school, where I was at a cultural disadvantage because my family didn't have a TV and didn't listen to "secular" radio stations. So whenever the other kids were quoting movies or talking about Madonna or New Kids On the Block, I was left out.

Again I remember being laughed at directly a couple of times when I tried to fake it but got called out for not knowing what I was talking about.

I didn't know, so I wasn't accepted. I compensated by trying to become someone who knows things.

"Nicodemus is "so uncomfortable with his unknowing" says Barbara Brown Taylor. Me too, Nic, me too.

But there's an invitation in Jesus' words about not knowing. "So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Remember, Jesus isn't suspicious of Nicodemus' shadow self. Or mine. The Unknowing isn't failure, it's not weakness, it's part of the program! And more, it also points to a deeper truth about me, a deep and pure desire for knowledge.

I put on the mask of knowledge because I don't want to be laughed at. But if I go beyond that, if I step into the shadow of my ignorance, I can see that my desire to learn and know and understand existed long before some farm hands and school kids laughed at me. And even that desire to know in order to belong, that's a deeply human characteristic. That's a virtue, not a flaw.

I want to know things because curiosity and the desire for structure and meaning and belonging is part of my True Self, the image of God in me!

And so there's freedom in admitting my not-knowing. I don't have to be driven by shame, I can admit that I don't know and that I want to learn! By admitting that I don't know where the wind comes from and where it's going, I can become like the wind, free to follow where it leads.

And spiritually, by admitting that I don't know who God is and what the Spirit is up to, I become like the Spirit, free to flow to wherever the Spirit is. I don't have to reject the things that don't fit into my pre-existing theological boxes; I can say "God, I don't understand how that's possible but what's happening over here definitely seems like the presence of God!" I can go there and figure out the how and why along the way.

That's the gift that Jesus offers to Nicodemus, at night, not the burden of knowledge but the freedom of endarkenment.

Once again from Barbara Brown Taylor: *"You do not know," Jesus says. Not because you are stupid, but because you are not God. So relax if you can, because you are not doing anything wrong. This is what it means to be human.*" (p167)

"...I will never figure this out, but that is good news, not bad. To walk the way of sacred unknowing is to remember that our best ways of thinking and speaking about God are provisional. They are always in process--reflecting our limited perspectives, responding to our particular lives and times, relating us to our ancestors in the faith even as they flow out toward the God who remains free to act in ways that confound us. If our ways of thinking and speaking of God are not at least that fluid, then they are not really theologies but theolatries [that is, idolatries]--things we worship instead of God, because we cannot get God to hold still long enough to pin God down." (p171)

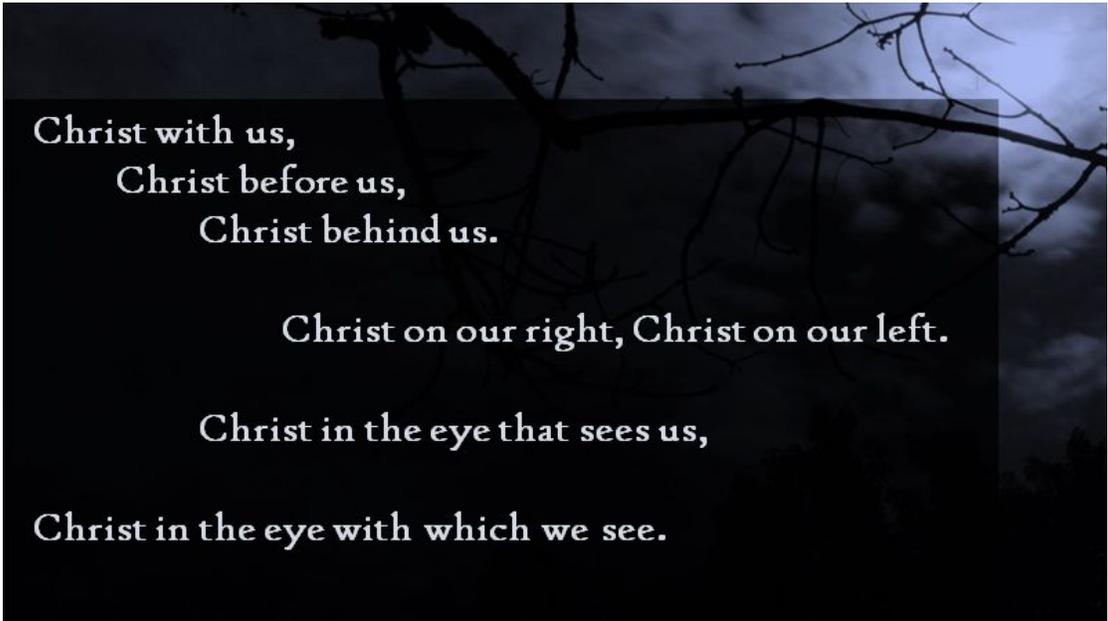
So. Back to Proverbs 3:5-6:

Trust YHWH with all your heart, and don't rely on your own understanding;

That doesn't mean rejecting what we do understand or shutting down our desire to learn and to know. But rather, to embrace the *unknown* as space where God lives as well.

That frees us up to genuinely acknowledge and look for *God "in everything we do"* and to accept the impenetrable way of the wind as *God "directing our paths."*

May the Spirit endarken us and surprise us along the way. Amen.



Christ with us,
Christ before us,
Christ behind us.

Christ on our right, Christ on our left.

Christ in the eye that sees us,

Christ in the eye with which we see.