

Lent 2A
St. John 3:1-17
March 12, 2017
St. George's Church Bolton
Fr. Chris

“He Came By Night”

“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."

He had a reputation to keep. He didn't want to be seen colluding with this at best, itinerant preacher, and at worst rebellious trouble-maker for the establishment of which he was a part. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. He was no fool. In fact, he was a wise and learned man, who knew that the learning never stops. He was always open to learning something new. The door to his mind, unlike many others of his ilk, was not slammed shut. So he stepped out into the night.

He came in the dark at night, at least, trying to minimize his risk, to find out more about this Jesus and what he was teaching, and from the context of the story, he came truly to learn and not merely seeking evidence to have Jesus arrested.

He came by night. He did not seek the truth in the light of day, but at night, in the darkness. Perhaps God would make the darkness into light. Perhaps this Jesus would open a tiny pinhole in the great black curtain through which he might gain some new insight into the real truth about God. He was wise enough to know that the more you know, the more you come to realize, the less you know. In this case, less is more means more humility. True wisdom is humbling. Why do you suppose?

When you cast the light of a powerful flashlight at the darkness surrounding you, you come to be aware of many things in the nighttime environment of which you were unaware, as you stumble in the darkness or made your way through the moonlight. Yet even with the powerful light of such a lantern or flashlight, there is still a lot that goes unseen, disappearing into the darkness, just beyond the beam of the flashlight you have been shining into the darkness. So much unseen! So much unknown! So much hidden behind the cloak of darkness, waiting to be revealed. And perhaps it will remain hidden unless you explore and look more deeply into the shadows with your weapon against the unknown, regardless of the brightness of its beam.

So it is with our knowledge of God. What we think we know resides in our minds, perhaps fixed, and unwilling to be open to finding out more. And why? Why would we be afraid to learn more about the God who came to be among us and gave of the very heart of God's being, that we might see the light and find comfort, peace and life.

But how do you learn more about God? Well, first of all, there is your local church. There is the reading of scripture in the worship and the homily which follows each week. There are opportunities for adults to learn more in the Lenten Group which gathers after church each Sunday in the lounge or the Adult forum each week on Tuesdays. And there are the occasional Bible Studies.

There is always your own copy of the scriptures to peruse. And there are also opportunities to explore on your own with excellent spiritual books like *Forward Day by Day*, and so many others. Just ask me {Fr. Chris} for a few recommendations, or you can search the Internet also.

All of these suggestions sound all too familiar. While they may seem common and ordinary, they are also quite fertile if you give them a chance. However, they seem so familiar, that I dare say I have been there and done that before. So, what's new? What could spark my interest, not to mention, my faith?

How do I really learn more about God? We can take a clue from the example of Nicodemus: risking the ground upon which you stand, risking feeling foolish for what you said you believed in the past, and stepping out into the dark night of the soul.

The term 'dark night of the soul' refers to the poem by a 14th century mystic named John of the Cross. The term "Dark Night" conjures up images for me of the passage from today's Gospel. The term was another way of describing God metaphorically for John of the Cross, for God was the unknowable being, just beyond the edge of darkness, elusive to our human comprehension. He begins his poem this way:

"In an obscure night
Fevered with love's anxiety
(O hapless, happy plight!)
I went, none seeing me
Forth from my house, where all things quiet be"

—that is, the body and the mind, with their natural cares, being stilled. At the beginning of the treatise entitled, "Dark Night," St. John of the Cross wrote: "In this first verse, the soul tells the mode and manner in which it departs, as to its

affection, from itself and from all things, dying through a true mortification to all of them and to itself, to arrive at a sweet and delicious life with God."

In his collection of essays, *The Crack-Up*, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote his take on the dark night with these few, now famous words: "In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning". For many of us this is true as we ponder deep questions, painful guilt, haunting self-doubt in the sleep-deprived middle of the night.

Indeed, Nicodemus wrestled with the words of Jesus as he tried to understand what he could not comprehend: "Very truly, I tell you, [Jesus said] no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" The perspective of God made no sense to him, just as it would not make much sense to us should we ponder it. Jesus draws an example from the wind, yet Nicodemus is still bewildered: "Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?'" The point is, no one is supposed to understand these things at first blush. Our insights into the holy are brief glimpses, that is, if we have our eyes, ears and minds open to perceive them.

John, like so many Christians, sought to be with God, in a divine union, one which produces peace, bliss, insight, a sweet and delicious life with God, much like the enlightenment of the Buddha. Sometimes, as St. John knew all too well, the journey to God may involve dark, self-searching setbacks which shake us to our roots. Sometimes we are given such "setbacks" in the form of life changing experiences, unexpected, which seem to cast dark shadows over our lives. Mother, now St. Theresa of Calcutta struggled with her faith and doubt much of her adult life. I have found dark nights through my own causal interventions, things done and left undone, and leaving undone many of the really important things I ought to have done or said. I have found in my own experience that such dark periods can go on for some time, both in our awareness and without it. And then comes the light at the end of the tunnel, when hope is restored, just as Easter stands at the end of Lent, as a sign of hope to walk toward.

I am no mystic, nor do I even pretend to be one. I am at times either inexperienced or inept at prayer, and often I let days pass without hardly enough notice paid to the God who made me, being absorbed with my own pursuits, interests and worries. But I have been graced, undeservedly so, with a few moments of Grace in my life, often seen and comprehended by me in hindsight, yet no less a blessing.

Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, in her devotional book entitled, "Living Lent," [one of the great resources for spiritual reading and meditation that I mentioned earlier] said: "We read (the scriptures) for other kinds of truth—for how to know God's continuing presence in lives that do contain long, 'humdrum stretches of time in

which the more vivid evidences of the Divine love are a tad scarce. ... We go for days, weeks—forty days and forty nights—without a sign.” We all have repeated times when we wander in the wilderness, and I don’t just mean Lent, plodding along in the dry sands of an arid desert, longing for the cold water of some experience of hope or some sign from God to touch our tongues like a cup of cold water. And then it comes, just when it is least expected, a pleasant surprise, a taste of honey like the nectar of the serene bliss of eternity. And it may not be anything more than a crocus popping up its head from the soil, the first sign that the dark night is passing.

Lent invites us to join Nicodemus and step out into the “dark night.” It is not a fearful place, when we realize that in the deep darkness, God is present and revealed to us as a loving God, as we are reassured and told in John 3:16: “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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” We are so loved by this God and know that we, you and I, are at the end of God’s focused beam of light, beloved and desired more than we could imagine!

AMEN