



The Power of Darkness



A Sermon By
Ms. Anna Broadbent

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When I was in middle and high school I used to sneak out of the house in the middle of the night several times a week. You may have a couple of guesses of what I was doing under the dark of the night, but you're probably wrong. I used to quietly creep from my room, down the stairs, out the front door of the house and head down to the shores of Lake Superior, where I grew up. The lake was only a couple of blocks from my house. I had the same routine each time no matter what season it was. I'd walk down to a small point where I could be right next to the water, if I wanted to I could put my feet in for a few moments, but Lake Superior is always cold so that wouldn't last long even in the summer. I then would walk on a narrow hiking trail along the shoreline to a cliff that over looked the lake and sit next to my favorite tree. Once I found my spot I would begin to talk. Who and what I was talking to, I was uncertain, although now I know I was talking to God. I was able to ask my heart's biggest questions. I was able to cry about things in my home, my family and the world that I was carrying that were becoming too much for my 13 year old frame to hold. It was in this spot I was able to breathe. I didn't care about who was watching or listening, although I did have an audience of deer, rabbits, owls and even a bear once.

There was something about the dark of the night that allowed me to be myself. It allowed me to ask questions I would never ask during the light of day. It allowed me to confess pain and wrongs I had caused and it allowed me to grapple big existential questions. As I grew and became more aware of injustices around me, I would bring them to my tree. I would talk about how unfair it was that my friend got pregnant when she was 16 and was too afraid to tell anyone in her life. I would unleash my fury of having a mother with mental illness and wonder why she had to endure so much pain and why she just couldn't be "normal" so she could help me pick out a homecoming dress. All the big things of my adolescent life I brought to my tree and to my God under the cover of the night. There is something extremely safe about the darkness. There is no judgment and it is a space where it was okay to be broken. No one is standing over me with a flashlight inspecting all my bumps, bruises and broken pieces in the dark, they are just there... part of the night.

I wonder if Nicodemus felt something similar the first time he approached Jesus. Our text from John makes it very clear that Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, which is reinforced when Nic shows up again later in the gospel. Some believe the reference to the night is in respects to Nicodemus' spiritual awareness of Jesus... he's in the dark... which is true when we examine his interaction with Jesus, but I also think there is something about Nicodemus' choice to approach Jesus at night. Nicodemus is a prominent Jewish leader in his community. We know this because he is identified as a Pharisee and because Jesus identifies him as a teacher of Israel. Likely for Nicodemus, seeking out Jesus was a risk, a risk to his career and his family. There's a reason Nicodemus chose to pursue Jesus his way. In my opinion I could easily give Nicodemus a hard time for this... thinking that he is a coward, but I think we are all a lot like Nicodemus so we best be careful.

Nicodemus addresses Jesus as a Rabbi, offering his respect as a teacher. He also is aware of the signs or miracles that Jesus has been performing. So even if Nicodemus is not comfortable

approaching Jesus in the daylight he has been paying attention. He's been watching. So, for whatever reason, Nicodemus gets up the courage to seek Jesus out. Jesus and Nicodemus have this exchange that slightly resembles a conversation with a small child... lots of Hows? and Whys?

Jesus' message doesn't quite seem to get through to Nicodemus; he follows up each answer with another question. In Nicodemus' defense, Jesus' answers are quite confusing: "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." How is that possible? "Born of the flesh vs born of the spirit." What? "The winds blows where it chooses." Huh? This is confusing stuff. While I'm not going to tackle this in this sermon, I do think we have a lot to learn from Nicodemus.

So, Nicodemus takes a risk, seeks out Jesus and has this challenging conversation... and then what happens? For most characters in the bible it's rare for them to have a name, but it's even rarer for us to be able to know what happens to them after their interaction with Jesus. Nicodemus is one of the rare cases. Nicodemus appears in John's gospel two more times after this interaction. The second time Nicky shows up is when the temple police are talking with the chief priests and Pharisees about arresting Jesus. Nicodemus stands up for Jesus, against his peers suggesting that the Jewish law does not condemn people until they have had a fair trial. What a risk for Nicodemus to take! The third time that Nicodemus shows up is after Jesus' death. In John's gospel Nicodemus brings the anointing oils and helps Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial and lay him in the tomb.

It seems that despite the dark start of night cover and Nicodemus' confusion of Jesus message, that Nicodemus was truly transformed by his interaction with Jesus. We can see signs of this transformation by how Nicodemus behaved in the light. Nicodemus allowed the dark experiences to change him so that he was different when day light returned.

We all have dark periods of our lives. We have dark periods of our society. Sometimes the darkness has to do of our own doing, making choices that we are not proud of; living a life that does not match our morals and values. Other times the darkness comes unexpectedly, in an unexpected illness or death, oppression, injustice, wrongful convictions. The darkness can last for a night and sometimes it feels like we've been in the dark for years. Darkness can overwhelm us, it's scary and full of the unknowns, but there is also good in the darkness.

Big things happen in the dark, development and transformation happen in the darkness. Nicodemus would likely never have approached Jesus if there hadn't been the opportunity within the dark. I question where my faith would be if I hadn't been able to meet God in the dark by my tree. These moments were pivotal to me. I learned more about myself, my relationship with God and creation leaning against a tree in the middle of the night than I did anywhere else. I was transformed by these dark experiences and I know they have carried me to this point in my life.

The biggest lesson I take from Nicodemus is our responsibility to the darkness in our lives. We have a responsibility to explore how the darkness is developing us and transforming us, gently molding us into the person God created us to be. Dipping in to our darkness is a terrifying thing and certainly if not done well can be harmful. I think this message is at the very heart of what our new racial justice ministry, Wade in the Water, is doing. We are taking time to explore our history

of racial darkness (and current dark areas) in order to have a better understanding of who we are in the light.

So this morning, I wonder what are some areas of darkness that you have been through. How has God used the dark areas of your life to develop and transform you? Just as Nicodemus did, how are you allowing the lessons of the darkness carry forth with you in to the light of day? Where can we be standing up for Jesus against the institutions of our day as Nicodemus did with his fellow Pharisees? Where are using our own hands to care for the bodies of the broken as Nicodemus did when he anointed Jesus body for burial. Are we living transformed lives so much so that in the light we, as Christians, look differently. Do we stand out? Are we truly set apart by our baptismal vows and being transformed by a birth from above and being reborn by the spirit. Do we love so fiercely that people know we have had a powerful interaction with Jesus and radiate the love we have received?

Lent is all about exploration of space... space within our own lives and particularly creating more space for God. This Lenten season I encourage us all to explore the darkness in our lives, how that darkness is or has transforming us and lastly to answer the question, do our lives in the light reflect the power of our darkness. Amen.