

The Original “Nic at Night”

John 3:1-17

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I.

In 1985 the Television channel “Nickelodeon” began a separate channel to run in the evening aimed at adolescent children called “Nick at Nite.” It’s been a long time since my family has subscribed to a cable service that includes this channel, but I’m assuming the majority of those sitting here today know the channel. It’s funny that this adage “Nic at Night,” describing a television channel two-millennia after Christ, has become the title of a popular Christian children’s musical that recounts the story of Jesus and Nicodemus one dark night so many years ago. Today’s sermon is based on our Gospel reading from John chapter 3, the original episode of “Nick at Night.”

II.

Two things about Nicodemus before we turn our thoughts to his midnight rendezvous with Jesus. First, Nicodemus is a Pharisee. A devout Jew. An expert in the Law. If you’ve kept track over the years to the readings in church, you know that most often the Pharisees and

Jesus are at odds with one another. Jesus didn't mind their piety. Piety is a good thing if the heart is in it. But Jesus knew their hearts. He knew their piety was empty. "These people honor me with their lips," Jesus said, "but their hearts are far from me!" At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, at His baptism, Jesus calls the Pharisees a "brood of vipers"-snakes in the grass! At the end of His ministry Jesus pronounces seven "woes!" on the Pharisees-which essentially are death wishes. He calls them nothing but "whitewashed tombs" because He says that outwardly they appear righteous, but within they are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Not to be clear, Jesus doesn't not love the Pharisees. That's in fact, why He's saying what He's saying. He wants them to turn and repent, confess their sins, and live. So Nicodemus is a Pharisee all right, and if his brother Pharisees knew that He was curious about Jesus, a seeker if you will, he would have been ostracized. That's why Nicodemus has to come in the cloak of the night.

And that's the second thing to know about Nicodemus. He's not like the rest. He's different. He is curious. He hasn't just outright dismissed what Jesus has said. He's listened, from a distance. His heart wasn't closed, but he heard what Jesus had to say. And he'd considered it, and contemplated it. And he wanted to know more. And so he comes to Jesus in the middle of the night to talk. He begins with a little patronizing. "Teacher, he says, you must be from God, for no

one can do these signs unless God is with Him.” Nicodemus figures he’ll butter Jesus up a bit before they get down to business. But Jesus isn’t having it. He cuts through the small talk, and he looks at Nicodemus and says, “Here’s the truth Nic, you’ll never see the kingdom of God unless you are born again.” In other words, the path you are on, it’s not going to get you there. You are relying on yourself, you won merit, your own ability. That’s gotta change.

Think about it for a minute. What did you do to be born? Nothing. Being born is something that happens to you. You had no choice in the matter. And that’s just the point at which Nicodemus is stumbling. It’s what he thought he heard Jesus saying. But it was so difficult for him to accept. And so he politely asks. “Umm... Jesus. Could you explain just how exactly one can be born again? I mean crawling back up into my mother’s womb doesn’t exactly seem like a real possibility.” Again, Nicodemus isn’t getting it. He’s still thinking it’s about him. Something he needs to do.

And so Jesus reads his mind and says, “Nicodemus, don’t marvel at this statement. Don’t wonder at what I’m saying. To be born again is to be born of water and spirit (a baptism reference). It’s kind of like the wind. It blows. You hear it, you feel it, but you can’t see it. You don’t know where it’s coming from, or where it’s going.”

Huh, like the wind, thought Nicodemus. Here now, gone the next moment. In other words, completely out of my control. Nicodemus

didn't want to accept this. His whole life salvation was about what was in his control. Keep the law. Pray. Fast. But Jesus had flipped everything on its head. He had to be born again, Jesus told him. And there wasn't a darn thing he could do to make that happen. It had to happen to him. And with this thought in his head, helpless, and confused, and a bit discouraged, he looked at Jesus with a heavy heart, and said, "Jesus, tell me, how can this be?"

But instead of compassion, instead of comfort, Jesus offers criticism. "Aren't you a teacher of Israel?" Jesus asks. "If you're parading as a spiritual leader who teaches others, then tell me, why you don't have a clue in the world how things truly work in the kingdom of God? I talk to you in terms earthly things, like being born again, and you still don't get it. How on earth will you ever believe how things really work in the kingdom of God." And then Jesus told Him the Gospel. You know it well: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him would not perish, but have eternal life."

That's it. Nicodemus had heard. It wasn't about anything he was going to do that was going to earn him God's kingdom. If he was going to be there, God would have to give Him new birth in the faith. We never do hear what Nicodemus said after Jesus finished talking. Did he ask more questions? We don't know. Did he accept Jesus answer, or

did he continue to struggle with what was being said? We can't be certain.

III.

But we do hear once more from Nicodemus before the story is complete. So we know Nicodemus didn't simply just walk away. No, he remained a covert follower of Christ. He paid attention to what was going on from afar. From within the band of Pharisees, perhaps his heart was changing after this midnight encounter with Jesus. How do we know this? Well, I guess we can't know for certain, but Nicodemus cared enough to lay Jesus to rest. After Jesus was crucified, he met up with Joseph of Arimathea, one of Jesus' disciple, in secret so that none of the other Jews would find out. He was still too ashamed to be associated with Christ, but still too curious to stay away. So the two of them go and ask Pilate for Jesus body, so they can offer a proper burial. And in the dark of the night, together they carefully prepare Jesus' body for burial with expensive myrrh and aloes. And then, when all was completed, Nicodemus solemnly took the dead body of Jesus, and with Joseph, they bound it in linen cloths and place it in the grave in the garden.

And three days later, in the morning when news started to spread that Jesus was not in the tomb anymore, old Nicodemus heard about it, this time in bright light of day. He remembered what Jesus had told him, that the son of man must be lifted up, and that everyone who

believes in Him would have eternal life. It had happened just like Jesus said it would. And now Jesus was alive again. And when Nicodemus looked deep down inside his heart, and examined what was there, he realized, for the first time, that he believed, and that it had happened to him, it was nothing he could have done. And then he knelt down, tears of joy streaming from his cheeks, and wept like a newborn baby.