

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: John 19:38-42

Sermon Title: "Coming to Faith" (Trekking through the Gospel of John)

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“What ever happened to...?” Have you see those programs on TV, in which they showcase people who used to be in the public eye but now have disappeared, and we don’t know what they are doing today? VH1 has a program called “One Hit Wonders,” and they conduct a countdown of the greatest musicians of the 1980s or 1990s, and we usually see singers and bands that used to be popular, but now have taken up ice dancing or car racing or fashion designing. AOL.com will provide a link to another website that tells us what former child actors are doing today. Those cute little boys and girls are now in their 50s and 60s with balding heads or cosmetic surgery or maybe they look better than they did years ago.

Nicodemus is one of those people that shows up in the Gospel of John, and then disappears. We don’t know what happens to him for 15 chapters, until he appears once more at the burial of Jesus.

John helps us to remember who this man was. We

first encounter him in John 3, during that famous night in which Jesus gives the quote that we all have memorized by heart: John 3:16. (As a side note, every time we quote John 3:16, let us not forget to quote 3:17. But I digress...). John tells us that this Nicodemus is a Pharisee. This should raise a red flag for us. The Pharisees tended to be the antagonists of Jesus. They were the ones who needed to argue with Jesus about this theological point and that. They always needed to put him to the test to determine who Jesus really was. Some of those Pharisees out and out despised Jesus for his healing on the Sabbath and preaching on the mountainsides. Some of them gathered together to create plans to eliminate Jesus, to kill him in such a way that they would not be blamed for it.

Nicodemus is a member of this exclusive group, but he is also a troubled man. Jesus shows up, and Nicodemus wants to know more. He likes what Jesus is saying. He is compelled to hear more of what Jesus is saying. But he is a Pharisee, a member of a group who stands in opposition against Jesus. Nicodemus cannot hang out with Jesus too much, or it will look as though he is a follower. Nicodemus doesn't want to take that step yet of being called a follower. He is compelled by Jesus' ministry – his teachings and

healings – but he is not willing to move into the area of becoming a disciple of Christ. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

In Chapter 3 we read that it is nighttime when the men meet in some undisclosed location. Nicodemus meets with Jesus under the cover of darkness, so that the other Pharisees do not catch him meeting with the enemy. Nighttime not only describes the time of day – it also describes the emotional state of Nicodemus. It is dark inside his heart. Thick, gloomy clouds envelope his mind. Nicodemus, a ruling Pharisee of the Jews, is in turmoil. He loves to hear what Jesus is saying, but he has standing with the Pharisees that he doesn't want to lose. He loves to see what Jesus is doing, but he cannot get on board with it, because he might be ostracized, kicked out, made an outcast, by those he has known for a long time.

Sometimes it takes time to come to faith. Sometimes we don't accept the things that God is giving us, until we've spent some time with God, and absorbed all he gives us. Sometimes it is too overwhelming, the things we learn from God, so we need time to process them.

I think of C.S. Lewis, the great author of The Chronicles of Narnia books and great defender of the

Christian faith. He didn't start as a great defender of faith. Lewis grew up in a Christian home, with his grandfather being a vicar who could preach emotional sermons to make him cry. Lewis's mother won honors in school for math and logic, and his father owned a law practice, and the household was filled with Christian love and support. Lewis's perfect world shattered at the age of 9, when his mother and grandfather died one after the other. Lewis's father was heartbroken and didn't know how to raise C.S. or his younger brother, so he shipped the boys off to boarding school in England. They lived in Ireland. C.S. and his brother had to live without his family in a different country for most of the year.

Lewis lost any faith in God quickly. He was fascinated with the occult, and loved living a life of drinking and carousing. He viewed himself as an atheist who believed that the New Testament was just as mythical as the Greek myths he would read in school. When he became a professor of English Literature at the age of 27, it looked as though Lewis would never consider God again.

Sometimes it takes time to come to faith. It took C.S. Lewis time even to acknowledge that God existed. He started with Joy, not a person but a warm feeling

he was looking for. He was looking for it after his mother died: he thought Joy would be getting her back, which would never occur. He thought Joy was going back to a time when his family was whole again, but that wasn't it. Lewis discovered that Joy is a Person, and that Person is God, and God would be the only One to restore his life. When Lewis discovered Joy was God, he realized that God could influence his life. But even then it still took time to believe that Christ was his Savior, that the New Testament wasn't a myth like his Greek myths but a true story about a true Lord.

It took time for Nicodemus to come around. He started with a conversation with Jesus under the cover of darkness. He learned how the Holy Spirit moves like the wind, and how God chose to save the world – not condemn it like the Pharisees wanted to – and how it was the Son's ministry to keep anybody from perishing. In John 3 Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not know these things?”¹ Nicodemus didn't know a lot about spiritual matters, and it would take time to come around.

I have known people that have heard the word of God, but chose to ignore it. I myself have met people

¹ John 3:10.

who liked what they heard about God at first, but then rejected it. I remember sitting at my kitchen table with my wife in the last house we lived in (up in PA), and talking with a 30-year-old who had made some stupid decisions in his life. I remember both of us unwaveringly sharing God's word with him. We nearly beat him over the head with the Good News, because we wanted him to realize that only God could redirect his life. He seemed to listen. He seemed penitent. But it didn't take him long to ignore it, pass it off as silly godly advice he would hear from his silly mother, and he didn't want to listen to her either (you know how young kids are).

I have watched people in the congregation on a Sunday morning while I am preaching, and I have watched them texting while I preach and sleeping while I preach, and I wonder if they are getting it. Do they care about what God is telling them, not me? Are they just a little bit curious about Christ like Nicodemus was, or is texting and sleeping the end-all and be-all of their lives? Nicodemus didn't want people to see him with Jesus, but at least he visited with Jesus. At least he asked Jesus questions and learned something.

That something stirred Nicodemus. A seed was

planted deep within that he could not uproot. The more he heard Jesus' teachings, the more that seed turned into a small plant that spread to every part of his being. We don't hear anything about Nicodemus from John 3 to John 19, but he had to be listening. He had to be following Jesus' ministry from town to town. He had to be thinking about what Jesus was doing, and who Jesus was, and how Jesus could change his life.

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian pastor and author, says that there are two forms of revelation. Two "different ways of describing how you came to know something," he says. "One way is to say *you found it out*. The other way is to say *it occurred to you*."² Buechner says that there is a distinction between the two. We can find out that "Francis of Assisi gave all his money to the poor, called the sun his brother, and preached sermons to birds." But it occurs to us "that he must be a saint." We might find out that the Atlanta Braves didn't win their division, but it might occur to us that the Braves are first in the wildcard, so they could still make the playoffs, despite Bobby Cox retiring last year.

Nicodemus found out that a new guy was in town, Jesus. He found out that Jesus was proclaiming some

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, 97.

new message about God and salvation. It eventually occurred to him that Jesus was more than what people were saying about him. It occurred to him in their conversation at night and over the next years that Jesus was and is the Son of God.

We see the fruits of *it occurring to him*, when we read about Nicodemus in John 19. Jesus is dead, or at least his physically body supports no more life. Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus and a very rich dude, asks Pilate to take Jesus' body and bury it in his own tomb. Pilate gives permission. And then, Nicodemus appears again. The one "who at first came to Jesus by night," John reminds us, also came to the tomb. He offers a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 100 pounds of it, to use for preparing Jesus' body for burial.³ 100 pounds is a lot of myrrh and aloes. Have you ever carried 100 pounds of concrete to your back yard to cement a deck, or carried 100 pounds of rice from the truck to our food pantry? 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes to bury one person is overkill. Two of my commentaries say that Nicodemus brought enough to bury a king.⁴

Nicodemus knew what he was doing. It is no longer nighttime. It is daytime, both as the time of day

³ Other translations say 75 pounds worth of spices and aloes. I am using the NRSV translation.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John: Volume 2*, 306; Colin G. Kruse, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: John*, 368.

and as the emotional condition of Nicodemus's being. He will not hide anymore. He hauled a boatload of myrrh and aloes to Jesus' tomb, because it occurred to him that a king, his King, had died. He didn't care what the other Pharisees might think. He didn't care if he would be outcast from his little social groups. Nicodemus got it. Burying Jesus with 100 pounds of burial materials proves that he got it. And what joy would come to his heart the day Jesus would rise from that tomb with all its myrrh and aloes.

“Nobody figured Christianity out,” Frederick Buechner says. “It happened.”⁵ It just happens. To the most stubborn of people to the most scared of people, and even to the most receptive of people. We cannot escape it. God's word touches our eardrums and something begins to click and whistles and move within our being. God's word vibrates throughout our whole bodies, making us stop to think, making us feel guilty, making us feel comforted, making us do something. Even for those who don't want to hear what God's word has to say – and that includes non-Christians and Christians alike, because Christians can be just as stubborn as non-Christians – but even if we are jolted by God's word and we don't like that

⁵ *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, 98.

jolt, we find ourselves coming back for more. We needed to be jolted. We needed to be convicted. We needed to know that Somebody cares about us, Somebody wants to direct our lives, Somebody, God's himself, wants to bless us.

Nicodemus started in the dark of night and in the darkness of his fear and confusion, and he eventually got it. From the darkness of our confusion and fear, we can meet with Jesus. We can speak with him, listen to what he has to say. And we can step out of the darkness into his light, and our joy will be complete.