

Faith at Night (28Jan18) John 3:1-21

You thought you were sending me on vacation to enjoy the warm rays of the Florida sun. But for a guy with my fair complexion, that's dangerous. No, I was actually going to research night.

See, in this week's reading, evaluating the night may get us far enough: "There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night..."

Sure, as the reading goes on, we could contemplate newness of life and baptism and the strange work of the Holy Spirit and offer some gracious balance to diatribes about the necessity of born again conversions. There's the odd hair of the dog with a story from Numbers 21 about holding up fiery serpents or poisonous seraphim and how Jesus is like a Florida cottonmouth viper (which I did not get to research, much to Acacia's relief).

And, of course, there's the Gospel in miniature, that single verse that captures the core of our faith, of what we hold dear, those memorable words we in some way spend every Sunday and maybe the whole of our lives trying to comprehend and absorb, "for God so loved the world that God gave the only-begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Yes, there's much for pondering and exploring in there. But still I don't think we do poorly to get hung up already a verse and a half in. And on vacation in Florida last week, I didn't get beyond pondering and exploring the night, that the night could be beautiful, scary, vast, mysterious, simple, disorienting, and re-orienting.

For the beauty, I waited each evening as the sun set for stars to reappear, to be revealed one by one in the expanding darkness. They'd been there the whole time, of course, but I couldn't see them until it began to be night. For more, I crawled out of the tent a couple of times each night to gaze up at the billions of wilderness stars. As a tiny sliver of crescent moon reflected, dancing on wavy water, I gaped and gasped at brilliant Orion cartwheeling after Taurus the bull and was

stunned as Jupiter and Mars glistened brightly amid bejeweled Scorpio. Even bits of cloud drifting past unveiled more, beauty.

Maybe such beauty is what brought Nicodemus to Jesus by night. Maybe he was eager to behold a sight he couldn't from his usual perspective, where his sightlines were stuck amid the center of his society, his vision too obscured by the haze of daily life. Maybe looking clearly at Jesus in the dark made it all more resplendent, awe-inspiring, reawakening than his dullness of the usual daylight hours. Maybe everything appeared too plain to Nicodemus by day, so he ventured into the night for little glimmers of beauty, for Jesus as a perspective on God that he was unable to find in the broadness and brightness of day's commotion.

And maybe you come to church searching for beauty, something other than what you see day, by day. Even though it's morning, still you may come to enter the darkness, to step out of the blinding glare of your regular routines and patterns, again to notice the rich beauty you were unable to see because of your surroundings. Maybe as you venture here today, you're expecting a peek at what's been there the whole time, but was obstructed or hidden. Maybe you're re-attuned to God who usually gets lost in the mix. And as you come to experience this sporadically apparent subtle beauty, maybe you're again able to delight in life, to be fascinated, to offer thanks.

Or, slightly differently, maybe you feel you're actually seeing less when you come to worship, that we in some way don't look at the whole picture.

In the dark, while shapes you'd normally make out fade and blend into a solid black amalgam, night becomes an opportunity to focus, to simplify perspective. In the night, there are few distractions. I watched the flash of a red beacon buoy offshore. Occasionally a plane crossed overhead. There was one nightlight shining for a young person sleeping nearby. Occasionally a bit of noise, an owl, rooster, or cat, but mostly quiet and with a limited view.

You may come to worship precisely so the other stuff you ordinarily have to pay attention to and the concerns in front of you fade somewhat into the background, to dwell for a bit in silence. You might end up feeling like this is boring, like there's not enough here, like we're limited in scope and too quiet. Still, you may find that the daily distractions somehow disappear, and you can focus on a narrow perspective and attend to what you need to, with Nicodemus to ask the big questions. Somehow the quiet of a night sky prompts enormous questions.

And the dark presents smaller risks, as well. We can't pretend the darkness is all clear beauty. I observed on vacation that, being out at night, when there isn't much light, the darkness is darn dark. Remarkable, right? I was made to realize that if trying to find my way to the outhouse, I could be easily lost, confused, nervous, or even scared.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Maybe he thought he knew how he should proceed, but found his steps stumbling and leading the wrong direction, not so well ending up where he wanted or anticipated. Maybe that was frightening to him, disorienting.

And maybe for us, too, thinking we had it all figured out and were aware of the right path, still coming to encounter Jesus in the dark with only the small blinking beacon of his light, an oftentimes dim flashlight for the path ahead for our next steps, to see where we ought to go. And trying to maintain that faint focus doesn't easily resolve the lingering trepidation whether Jesus is leading us the right way, toward our destination. Nicodemus must have been left to wonder. Maybe your wondering, too, still has a question mark and your awe is unresolved.

Further, in the darkest places on my trip, I peered eagerly for a glimpse of the stretching Milky Way, arcing across the dome of the sky, not only a rare treat of gentle and subtle splendor for our overly-illuminated city eyes, but also a reminder of the stretch and scale of the cosmos beyond us, of so many stars so distant they don't seem to beam like the singularity of our sun but

blend into an amorphous cloud. That marks our place in a spiraling galactic arm, which still more limitlessly is amid billions of other galaxies, far beyond our view or even our comprehension.

Maybe you get blown away and actually find yourself in worship on less solid footing than before, reminded of God's grandeur and the utterly small significance of your lifespan, the incomprehensible enormity of scale—of God as Creator of all this universe and yet also as Creator of you, concerned about you, in love with you. Amid that infinite scope, for you to be chosen, important, cared for...well, that can be nearly unbelievable, that God would choose you, give you new life, love you, save you.

Or, again, that God isn't bound to the insiders, maybe sometimes that's the surprise, that God chooses and loves and strives for those who'd logically be left out. Jesus displaced Nicodemus from the center, from his position of prominence, shrinking his self-perception. Nicodemus couldn't quite grasp that, couldn't really fathom it. That was part of his shock. Even if he came trying to resolve answers, he came thinking that he as a teacher of faith would have an advantage and leg-up on figuring it all out, but was quickly left realizing he didn't understand these things of Jesus much at all.

Well, as I stood outside my tent staring up at the expanse of night sky, I was left with some of that sense, or maybe I should say that senselessness, that inability really to get it all.

Our reading says God so loved the world. The actual Greek word there is *cosmos*—God so loved the cosmos. And, just as John uses this term, we may not be much surprised that God loves the beautiful twinkling of stars across the heavens, relentlessly and powerfully fusing elements that will give birth to new creations, or that God loves comets that stay inevitably on course in orbit, or even that God loves the mysterious invisible forces of dark energy that we can neither see nor yet explain—all of that seems plenty godly and right.

But the still greater mystery is when John uses this phrase and term, God so loved the cosmos,

it's that God loves us, when we forget we are loved and resist being loved and all too apparently use our energy for bad and still would perhaps prefer to be self-sufficient and go our own ways instead of following God's paths of our orbit or ignore that we're inextricably hitched to everything else in God's good creation.

In this case, like Nicodemus we may need that re-placement, the mystifying awe and grace for our place of being loved. So maybe you find worship reorienting for your place in the world, the cosmos. Maybe it affirms your value, while also expanding your understanding.

In Florida, I kept searching for the Southern Cross and trying to get my bearings. I noticed that the constellations weren't all the same, not located in the same section of the sky, and there were unfamiliar stars we're not used to seeing in our northern latitudes.

Maybe Nicodemus and we have our awareness broadened in encountering Jesus, remembering that we are not the center of the universe, that there are others outside our usual field of vision and beyond our typical restricted narrow perspective who nevertheless are held in Jesus' embrace. That may feel jarring, perhaps dislocating for our self-importance, but honest and also beneficial for us in understanding or at least witnessing the scope of God's goodness.

God loves you, and God loves the cosmos. That reorders your understandings and is worth focusing on. It may seem strange, yet so simple and beautiful. And for that, maybe, like Nicodemus, in worship you come to Jesus by night.

Hymn: *Joyous Light of Heavenly Glory* (ELW 561)