

“Nicodemus: Unbeliever, Seeker or Genuine Believer?”

(A Dramatic Sermon)

John 3:1-17

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I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel
who call you by your name. (Isaiah 45:3)

Or so says the prophet Isaiah. Good things happen in the night, under the cover of darkness. It’s not all about scary things and stumbling about nor is it necessarily about hiding. Darkness can be a symbol of evil, untruth and ignorance, but it is also the time rabbis study.

I say all of this because people tend to think I come to Jesus by night for some nefarious reason or at the very least to hide my relationship with Jesus from other Pharisees. But they have it wrong, just like they have many things about me wrong. I come to him at night out of respect, acknowledging his place as a teacher. I am willing to speak up for him on other occasions in front of my peers. But, as I say, people have a lot of misconceptions about me.

At first glance, you probably see me in a negative light, as an outsider to faith, an unbeliever, a heathen. I am Jewish, after all, and a Pharisee, for goodness sakes. Cue the booing and hissing... Of course, Jesus is Jewish, as are all of his earliest followers. And Pharisees are reformers of the law, like Jesus in many ways. We are kindred spirits, not natural enemies.

But no matter what you make of this, I meet Jesus personally, interact with him, and seemingly do not respond in the correct way. The more answers he gives to my questions, the more questions I have, and the story ends with me still in bewilderment, not making a profession of faith and being baptized. Would you accept me as a member of your church today? It doesn’t look like I have checked all the boxes.

But I come to Jesus because I sense something special about him and I have a yearning to know more about who he is and what he believes. I tell him I know he is a teacher who comes from God. I ask questions because I want to understand and because what he is talking about is not ordinary, everyday stuff. This business of being born *anóthen* – which can mean “from above” or “anew” – is not ordinary, everyday stuff. Anyone who claims to get this the first time around clearly doesn’t! And most of all, the end of this story is not the end of my story, even in scripture.

In the seventh chapter of the Gospel According to John, Jesus is teaching in the temple at the festival of Booths. Some people find great strength in what he is saying while others think he is a con-artist. The chief priests and Pharisees, my colleagues, send the temple police to arrest him. But when the police hear him teaching, talking about the thirsty coming to him, even they are impressed. So, they do not arrest him, but when they return without Jesus, the authorities ask why they have not? It is at this point that I enter the conversation, saying, “Our law does not judge people without giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it (7:51)?” They look at me like I have lost my mind and assure me no prophet has come from Galilee.

In the nineteenth chapter of John, after Jesus has died on a cross, Joseph of Arimathea is given permission to take custody of Jesus’ body, I bring a mixture of myrrh and aloes to anoint him for burial, and we care for him together (19:38-40). As I have stood up for him in life, I care for him in death.

So, if someone wants to question my connection to Jesus, they better have a mighty close relationship with him. I may not fit neatly into your categories of believer/unbeliever, but I should at least fall into the category of seeker. I come to him with deep yearnings seeking faith, and he welcomes me just as I am without demanding that I respond in a specific way. He does not dumb down his message for me, he does not water down the truth he is trying to communicate about being born of the Spirit, but nor does he dismiss me harshly.

So, whatever you think of me, you might learn something from him at this point. Surely there are many people like me in your time,

people who are technically outside of the church but who might have a genuine interest in Jesus. I would suggest that you treat them like Jesus treats me. Welcome them with open arms, whether they come here or meet you at work or school. Embrace their questions — questions lead to understanding and faith. And give them room to sort things out for themselves. Jesus never pressures anyone.

And yet, while there are surely many people in your culture today like me, you may be more like me than you realize or are willing to admit in front of your friends. You have certain beliefs about Jesus and God — why we are in this world in the first place and whether there is something more than this life. But you still have a yearning to know more, do you not?

You have strong convictions about certain things, including matters of faith and ethical concerns, even if you don't always agree with each other. I have always been told that where there are three or four Baptists, there are always seven or eight opinions which is different for Episcopalians, of course - where there are three or four, there is always a fifth... Well, even among some Baptists...

But even though you have strong convictions, you still have questions, especially about the great mysteries of faith – how the Trinity really works, one God in three persons – and about some very complex ethical concerns – how you should deal with end-of-life questions, what the natural course is, what God's will is.

And like me, you do not come to faith in a moment. There is a process which takes time wherein you learn about Jesus and become intrigued, ask questions, struggle, and eventually find yourselves doing different things because of him and his teachings, believing different things about God and other people and all of life. And at some point, you may proclaim your faith.

I think you Baptists like to get in the water as a symbol of cleansing and renewal. We do too. But you made some changes before you got in the water and some you still need to make. It's not a mechanical process – this business of following Jesus – it's not exactly the same for everyone. But we all become attracted to him, we all ask questions and struggle, we all become more convinced there is

something special about him and his way of life, and we all, pray God, eventually believe in him and follow him.

I do. I am a genuine believer, whether you would accept me as a member of your church or not. It's not the same thing, you know. Many fine Christian people have been refused membership in churches over the years for various reasons – the color of their skin, how and when they got in the water, etc., ad nauseum – and there are many church members who don't really believe in Jesus, trust their hearts and lives to him and his way of life. Don't confuse church membership with faith, but whether you would have me or not, I am a genuine believer in him, a follower, a disciple.

But that's enough about me. What about you? Where do you stand today? Are you an unbeliever, a seeker, a genuine believer, or somewhere in between? I won't ask for a show of hands. What would that mean anyway? But where are you really, deep down in your heart? God loves you wherever you are; whether you even believe in God or not, God loves you. So, it's "O.K." to be honest about where you are.

And if your faith is still in process, then I say – good for you! There is always more to know about God and life. Keep asking your questions, be honest about what you do and don't believe, what you do and don't understand. God values honesty about as much as anything else. So, does Jesus. I would know. And the next time my name comes up in conversation, say a good word for me. Would you?

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Good things can happen under the cover of darkness. I should know. Something wonderful happened for me, even though not everything was resolved that night. Good things can happen in the light of day too. God is sovereign over the day and night and is available to us always. Trust in that, take advantage of that, and know that Jesus will always welcome and value your interest, your questions, even your doubts, because he

did not come into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.