

“Encountering Jesus: Finding Courage”

The Reverend Pen Peery

Date: February 18, 2024



Listen with me for a reading from the 3rd and then the 19th chapters of John’s gospel:

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Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’

Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

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After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

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In the coming weeks of Lent, my guess is that you will know most of the stories we will explore about different people encountering Jesus. You probably remember the story about woman at the well. I’m sure you’ve heard of Lazarus. You remember Pontus Pilate.

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In any story – whether it is in the Bible or a good book or a movie or a television show – I think we all tend to want to identify with one character or another. It helps us understand what it going on – more fully appreciate what we can learn...so we seek out someone in the story who connects with us.

I had a harsh revelation this week as I sat with this morning’s Scripture. The revelation was that of all the characters we will hear about this Lent who encounter Jesus, the one I most identify with is this Pharisee named Nicodemus.

You don’t have to be a Bible scholar to know that Pharisees are portrayed as kind of the “bad boys” of the Gospels. Jesus is always getting in fights with the Pharisees. Pharisees are simultaneously the rule-followers, and the one who misunderstand the spirit of the rules. Pharisees are often portrayed as the people who just don’t get it – they come off as if they are the obstructionists in the way of Jesus’s goals.

In reality, Pharisees were well respected members of the religious establishment. They were kind of upper-middle class leaders in the cities and towns where they lived. People sought them out for advice...listened when they talked. They were the ones who had the responsibility of strengthening institutions and communities. Does that sound like anyone you know?

Nicodemus was a special kind of Pharisee. Scholars believe he was a Pharisee who was a member of the Sanhedran – which is kind of like the Session of the synagogue. Not only was Nicodemus a well-respected member of the religious establishment, but he was somewhat of a public figure...he was someone who was **known** in the community.

In our Scripture today, we learn that Nicodemus sought Jesus out. That may not sound like a big deal – who wouldn’t want to seek out Jesus? But remember: in the eyes of those who were in positions of authority, Jesus was a rabble rouser. Jesus was the one who whipped up the crowds into a frenzy. Jesus was the one who bent the carefully constructed rules and then challenged the Pharisees on why the rules existed in the first place. Jesus was the one who – rightly – was perceived to be a threat to the order of things: a threat to the religious establishment, and to the Roman Empire who depended on the religious establishment to help them keep order.

In reality, it was a really big deal that Nicodemus – a leader – would come seek out Jesus – a revolutionary. Nicodemus was there because he had recognized that something was different about Jesus. He could tell that Jesus was special. He said, “we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from God.” Most Pharisees would never admit these things...but Nicodemus did – and that took a certain amount of courage.

And yet...did you notice when Nicodemus sought Jesus out?

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It was at night. Under the cover of darkness.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night – so as to not be seen...not be associated with – the person he knew came from God.

So maybe we'd call that **half**-courageous.

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Here's a confession: that's another reason why I identify with this Pharisee named Nicodemus. Because I know what it is to be half-courageous.

I know what it is to try to do the right thing, and to **want to** do the right thing, but to constantly be weighing how I might do the right thing **and** still protect my reputation and standing in the group.

I know what it is to stick up for someone – or a group of someone's – who need support – but only behind closed doors where I can speak off the record.

I know what it is to *change my mind* – to recognize that I have been wrong about something or someone – but to do so in a way that I also always manage to save face.

I know what it is to recognize that I am caught up in a larger system that benefits me and people like me – and to try to unlearn some things, and make some changes and advocate for some more – but not to actually risk much, or do things that will cost me (literally and figuratively).

So, yes – my identification with Nicodemus actually goes beyond the similarities I see between our place in the religious establishment and our role as leaders...I also find that I identify with what we learn about Nicodemus's character: that he means well, but isn't quite courageous enough to lean all the way in and live according to what he knows to be true.

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Our world could use more courage.

Take this in as bi-partisan way as it is intended – but our leaders, in our city, our state, and our nation – could benefit from being more courageous. I'm not naïve – I know the problems we face are complicated and will require political and pragmatic solutions – but they also will require a healthy dose of courage by our leaders to think beyond themselves and their electoral security.

I think we could use some courage, too.

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My guess is that there is something in your own life – a kid at school who gets picked on and needs someone to stick up for them; a decision at work that might not be popular, but needs to be made; a conversation with someone close to you that will likely be uncomfortable, but needs to happen in order for there to be growth – my guess is that there is something in your life that requires more courage than you’ve yet to muster.

We tend to lionize those who practice courage.

In light of headlines from this week, I think of Alexi Navalny.

In the midst of Black History month, I think of Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King, Jr.

From my trip to Normandy, France last summer, I think of the Allied troops who landed on D-Day.

It’s easy to point to others whose acts of courage seem impossible to match – because they accomplished something so major, or because it cost them their lives (or both).

But most of the time, the kind of courage our world needs shows up in less dramatic, everyday kind of ways. A word here, an action there...a hard choice...a vote...a willingness to show up...to push beyond the place we are most comfortable. Those are the things – when done collectively – that make a difference...that lead to positive change.

The trick is to understand what motivates us to act with courage and to try to move past those things that limit us by fear.

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When Nicodemus came to Jesus at night – eager to learn more, drawn to Jesus by the signs and wonders he had heard of Jesus performing – when Nicodemus came to Jesus at night he was confused. He and Jesus engage in a conversation that demonstrates that – as sure as he was that Jesus was something special – he still didn’t quite grasp the degree to which God was at work through this person who the crowds followed and who felt like a threat to those who were in power. Nicodemus was limited by thinking that God was too small – and that the way God was at work within the world was defined by the rules that he and his fellow established leaders had created and enforced.

What Jesus says to Nicodemus explodes his thinking. It’s not that God cares only for those who follow the agreed upon rules, *“For God so loved **the world**,”* Jesus said *“...that he gave his only son. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him...”*

John’s gospel doesn’t tell us what Nicodemus says in response to this – most famous – line by Jesus. We don’t have a sense of how it landed on him. How it challenged his thinking. How it affected him in the moment. After Jesus says this, John’s gospel changes scenes and Nicodemus fades to the background.

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But, later, we get a glimpse of the way this encounter with Jesus made an impact.

After Jesus completed his journey – and laid down his life for the world that he came to save – when his lifeless body was taken down from the cross – John’s gospel tells us there were two men who came to take care of the body...and honor it...and give it a proper burial. One of those men was Joseph of Arimathea.

And the other was a Pharisee named Nicodemus...who came to take Jesus’s body in the light of day, risking the cost that he might pay because of his association with someone those in power thought to be a threat...

maybe because the love he heard Jesus talk about – and then embody through his living and his dying – lit in Nicodemus the fire of courage...
to live that love out loud himself.

May it be the same with us.

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In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.