

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Nicodemus: Secret Ops”

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John 3:1-2

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Today we start a new series in the Gospel of John, for the most part just on one chapter, John chapter 3, and particularly through the lens of one person, a man named Nicodemus, who appears only in John’s Gospel, and really only in this one chapter, with the exception of two other quick instances in which he pops up later. We’ll get to those.

Now even if you only have a little bit of familiarity with the Bible, when I said “John chapter 3,” that might have rang a bell, because John 3 contains what is probably the single best known verse in the entire Bible: John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” It is well known for good reason: a beautiful word of Scripture, powerful verse, “the gospel in miniature” as Martin Luther put it.

However, because so much attention is put on that one verse, in a weird way, the rest of this powerful chapter can sometimes get overlooked, which is a real shame, because this chapter, an exchange between this man Nicodemus and Jesus, can teach us so much about faith, about doubt, about being drawn to this Jesus, and not just for those who claim that faith, but perhaps especially for those of us for whom faith has been and continues to be a work in progress.

So we’ll be going through this powerful part of John’s Gospel, bit by bit, starting today with just a couple of verses. Let’s go to God’s Word together. **John 3:1-2,**

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 unless God is with that person.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Holy God, we praise you for no matter what hesitations we might approach you with, you come to us in faithfulness and grace, revealing yourself to us through your Word, and most of all through the Word made flesh. Guide us this day, and give us courage to seek you anew. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I had a great-aunt and great-uncle who served in the National Security Agency. Many of y’all know what the NSA is. It’s part of the broader “clandestine service agencies” in our country. Apparently the NSA doesn’t do so much in the way of foreign espionage, so not so much James Bond, secret agent, spy game stuff, but more straight up data gathering and processing, on an enormous scale. Nevertheless, very secretive, and my great aunt

and great uncle when they were alive were pretty tight-lipped about their service, and throughout their career, they were both very careful not to do anything that would jeopardize their effectiveness in this clandestine agency.

Among the rules the NSA had, at least at the time, was no direct, public, outspoken support of any political candidate. Vote, for sure, vote. But don't go leaving a trail of your political leanings in a way that could reflect badly on the agency.

In 1968, the then governor of Alabama named George Wallace ran for president. Today, he is best known for his stances on pro-segregation policies, thus obviously against the Civil Rights Movement going on at the same time. Those were some tense years in our country. Suffice it to say, he was a polarizing figure, and because he was running for president in 1968, in that particular year he was especially polarizing.

My great-aunt's brother, my grandfather, loved his sister very much. And as an expression of that love, my grandfather made a small contribution to the political campaign of Governor George Wallace, not because he supported him, but because he loved his sister, in the way that only brothers can. So he of course didn't make the contribution in his own name. He made the donation in his sister's name. Put down her name on whatever form or letter that was sent. Put in some cash, I guess, since one of his own checks would obviously blow his cover. And put it in the mail.

What do you think happened after that? Well my great-aunt was never heard from again. No, I'm joking. She just got in a lot of trouble. Why? Because the NSA is gonna NSA. They found out. They were keeping tabs on who was supporting these polarizing figures, and lo and behold, one of their own shows up on the list. Some words were shared, and Thanksgiving was apparently awkward that year.

I share that little story because it's amazing the lengths folks will go to to hide in the shadows or otherwise not be associated with someone polarizing.

Nicodemus, those many years ago in Jerusalem, was trying to stay in the shadows too. He didn't want his colleagues to know who he was associating with.

Now an immediate disclaimer. In this little analogy, the point I am not trying to make is comparing Jesus to segregationist governor George Wallace. That is not the point. The point is, look at how Nicodemus comes to Jesus, this polarizing figure.

At this point in Jesus' ministry, according to John's Gospel, Jesus was already becoming well known, but his ministry was only just starting. He had been endorsed by his cousin, John the Baptist, at this revival of sorts out in the boonies. He performed a miracle, his first, at a wedding in Cana, turning water into wine. He had come to Jerusalem, and in the temple courts, confronted the moneychangers and swindlers, driving them out of the temple. And along the way, others were starting to follow him, witnessing various signs, signs of teaching, signs of healing, signs of power.

It is on the heels of that confrontation at the temple that this man Nicodemus comes to Jesus. And how does he come to Jesus? V. 1 says, "Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night." He came by night.

What can we tell about this man, just from that short description? He came by night. There's something secretive about that, like there was something he was trying to hide, like he didn't want other people to see him

coming to this Jesus. Why would he do that? Plenty of other people were coming to Jesus. Why would he be so sheepish, even afraid, of doing so in a way other people would notice?

Well a big part probably has something to do with the office Nicodemus served. John introduces him as a Pharisee, as a leader of the Jews. His stature among the Jewish religious authorities will be revealed even more a few chapters later, but suffice it to say that this man had some clout. Not just something like high society, maybe some of that, but it more had to do with the level of religious conviction he and others like him clearly felt.

See the Pharisees—and some of you may remember my sharing this before—the Pharisees get a bit of bad rap sometimes. We can too often think of them as these sticks in the mud, clinging to and misapplying antiquated laws and missing the spirit behind them. That might've been part of it, but the Pharisees' movement wasn't just clinging to how things were. It was a reform movement, seeking to reclaim the national religious identity of the people of Israel through a renewed adherence to the law, the Law of Moses, God's Law, something that they saw as sorely lacking among the people and even among the conventional Jewish establishment. So they were stepping on toes themselves.

So when Jesus cleared out the moneychangers and swindlers from the temple courts, a part of Nicodemus probably thought, "Amen, brother. That had to go." But then if he heard that Jesus had said things like, "Stop making *my Father's* house a marketplace!" or "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," he probably would've thought, "Hey hold on a second. *Your* Father's house?"

What Jesus had done was quite the shot across the bow, and though Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, probably would've sympathized with the end result—a purging of the temple from corruption and greed—he and others like him would've raised more than a few eyebrows at the sorts of things Jesus was saying along the way.

And yet there was something about this Jesus, something about the signs, the miracles he was performing, something about the conviction and peace with which he taught, something Nicodemus couldn't shake loose of.

He ends up telling Jesus as much: "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." He can't deny what has been going on.

But still, he had his reputation to consider. What would his colleagues, his friends, all those who shared his desire to see an Israel renewed through the Law, what would they think if he was seen approaching this Jesus with genuine curiosity?

There's something deeply ironic about Nicodemus. In his position as a leader among the people, he's supposed to speak and act with conviction, certainty. In his status as a Pharisee, that certainty focused on the clear adherence to the Law, of faith in that Law to be the God-given vehicle for the people's renewal before the Lord and restoring their nation. Even his very name, Nicodemus, declared triumph; it means, "Victory of the people."

And yet he comes to Jesus by night, sneaking about to avoid notice. He's taking a risk even doing so, to be sure, but it's a mitigated risk. He's dipping his toes in the water. It would've been more than easy for Nicodemus to confront Jesus in the same combative manner the Pharisees and scribes would confront him over and over. But he doesn't. This leader of the people. This man of conviction and certainty. This figure carrying the banner of renewal by the Law. But he genuinely wants to know more. There's something about this Jesus that he can't quite shake. He just wants it to stay a secret for now.

In the way of secrets, I have another family member who is in some way connected to the clandestine services. I can neither confirm nor deny direct knowledge of his precise activity, past or present. But he's a man of faith himself, and I remember his sharing with me something he had noticed among others in that line of service. He said he knew of any number of individuals, those blessed with skill and intelligence, but also burdened with leadership and responsibility, and because they're in the clandestine services, burdened as well with great knowledge that they can't tell anyone about. They have to keep their secrets. They have to operate in the shadows.

Something he also observed among this sort of folk was a yearning for something true, and how on any number of occasions, they would seek out faith in this Jesus, but in a cautious way. Is it true? Is this intelligence reliable? Is there plausible reason for doubt? Pushing and pulling on the claims of faith. But also cautious, I suspect, because of how others in that same line of work might think of them. "Oh, you believe that stuff? You of all people should know just how silly it is."

And yet, like Nicodemus, there's something about this Jesus that they just couldn't shake.

We don't have any folks here in the clandestine services, in secret ops. Or do we? I can neither confirm nor deny any direct knowledge of any person's involvement in such agencies.

But what I do know is here today we have any number of people feeling the same pressure of responsibility, of leadership, feeling the same burden to present themselves with conviction, with certainty. Doesn't have to be some high-flying professional thing. It could be within your schools, within your workplaces, within your social circles. And perhaps through them, you feel the same hesitation, that nudge toward secrecy, to consider someone like this Jesus because of what others around might think. "Oh, you believe that stuff? You of all people should know how silly it is."

Maybe you're here for the first time and you don't quite know why. Maybe you've been here for a long time, but you've always harbored doubts and questions that you've never felt equipped or encouraged to ask, and so you've held back, just coming out of politeness or dedication to a family member or something.

And yet, like Nicodemus, there's something about this Jesus that you just can't shake. Sure there are things about him that make you think, "Whoa, now hold on a sec." No doubt there are things about his followers that give you even more pause. But still, maybe you feel a pull, an undeniable pull, to know more.

If there's an encouragement from a man like this, it's that those first steps toward Jesus can indeed come by night; they can indeed happen in secret. As we'll find out shortly, Jesus meets Nicodemus. The knock on the door is answered. And steps are small, even imperceptible.

But one thing is sure. Though Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, in the shadows, he didn't stay there. Even here, just in these first few words of meeting, there's this invitation to step out of the shadows and into the light.

Friends, take the next step. This Jesus will answer.

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