

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“Now There was a Man”

John 3: 1-17

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“Now, there was a man.” That’s a good way to begin a story, don’t you think. A man... it tells us right off that this story is going to be about someone particular... it’s not a story about the masses.

The bible is interesting that way. It begins in this grand generality... **God creates humankind... male and female... in his own image.** That’s chapter one... but by chapter two we’re on a first name basis with someone... Adam... Eve... and the two of them have a story, don’t they?

And John’s gospel is similar... **“In the beginning, the Word creates all things and then one day dwells in creation as the light that enlightens all humankind...”** All of us, it’s big, grand, and comprehensive. But then John begins telling stories... particular, gospel stories about folks who encounter this eternal Word with skin on it..

And they’re all different... these folks... they’re all in need... but different. There’s a woman who’s lonely... and one who’s humiliated. There’s a man who hasn’t walked in 38 years and one who’s never seen. There are folks... hungry... folks afraid... folks grieving.

Everyone of them has a life... like you do. They would wake up... like you do... to a mixture of meaning and boredom. Some wounds... some worry... some things to look forward to. Some things to regret... a dream or two.

There is always a life that is intersecting with the gospel. Jesus... God among us... is interested in lives... in particular stories... including yours. The universe is personal and so is the gospel story.

So, **“now, there was a man”** is an important way to begin this story. He was living his life. Imagine it...

He wakes each day to his routines... to the mundane and necessary.

He interacts... with this one and with that thing.

He carries his questions and his beliefs... which matter sometimes and sometimes, not.

He has duties... like you do.

He has passions... like you do.

Loves... like you do.

“There was a man”...with a life... who was of the Pharisees.

Ah... now he has a title... a role.

Which is important, you know. We all come sprawling out of adolescence... looking for titles... and roles... something to locate us in the vast world. It really helps to settle you into life when you’re getting started.

“I’m a... seminarian... There... got that settled.”

“I’m a teacher...”

A homemaker...

I have a business."

Just helps when you have something on the stationary, huh? There's some definition...a business card. And we get better and better... refining and defining. We pick adjectives to go in front of our titles.

"I'm an outgoing... community activist."

"I'm a skilled carpenter."

"... dedicated parent."

"... sensitive chaplain."

It helps... getting this nailed down and we all do it... It's important to know who you are and what your role is... Some folks get real particular about it these days. They even have tests, you know **"I'm an INFJ."**

Now there was a man of the Pharisees... and the title narrows it down some... not completely, though. He was one of thousands who learned the law. They studied it. Talked of it endlessly. Sliced and diced it.

When this man was young, he must have had great enthusiasm for it, don't you think? Couldn't wait to sit with this teacher or that one, he'd heard so much about... and the first time he did... he felt something so great.

"I belong here...

found my nitch...

these are my people...

I just love being a Pharisee."

Of course, the newness wore off eventually. And he found himself drawn to a smaller, less conventional group of Pharisees who loved to dream about the day when they'd finally take over, and then they could reform this thing. He and his friends met for wine after class and spoke cynically of the way things were.

Now there was a man... of the Pharisees... named Nicodemus. It keeps getting specific, more Nicodemus. A name folks knew I'll bet.. He was a somebody. Maybe from old money. This was a well-financed Pharisee who'd had doors open because of his family. And sometimes he loved that and sometimes he ran from it.

Now there was a man... of the Pharisees... named Nicodemus... a member of the Jewish ruling council." It just gets more and more particular. The Jewish ruling council was sort of like a religious supreme court. They applied the law in the community.

If you had a dispute over a goat... you'd go there. If you got in trouble for working on the Sabbath, these folks would fine you.

It was an honor when he was chosen to be on the Sanhedrin.

It'd been a goal of his.

Now he had titles and esteem...

He was there now... inside the inside. He has responsibility. He's a defender now of the way things were. It's not hard to imagine Nicodemus as being the envy of everyone.

Has a family for sure... money... prestige and power. Nicodemus really has it going.

If so, why does he come to Jesus and come to him at night. That's the most important descriptor John has given us so far. **"He came to Jesus at night."** He's in the dark, for some reason, huh?

Afraid of being seen with Jesus, perhaps that's likely. But John, in his desire for you to see a particular person, is telling us something much more important than simply that Nicodemus might be worried for his reputation.

It's nighttime in his life... He comes to Jesus in the darkness and from his own darkness. I think his life has pretty much run its course.

His titles... the ones that once gave him security... aren't enough.

The pleasure he once got from being extra clever isn't enough.

The meaning he got from taking care of his community... isn't enough now.

His kids have left the nest.

He and his wife get by.

He's a midlife poster boy.

It's dark and the darkness is not some indictment that he'd done things wrong along the way. It's just that it's no longer enough. He needs something else.

And he's really hungry for it so he goes to find Jesus at night.

The conversation begins with his confession. **"Rabbi, you're obviously from God or you couldn't be doing what you're doing."** I used to hear this as icebreaker, but not anymore. He wants something eternal... something from God. He's heard way too much second and third hand. He has to get to the real thing.

Jesus, as he often does in John, cuts through everything... He sees right to the heart of things and takes out the prophetic scalpel and lays Nicodemus out. **"Nicodemus, you won't be able to see the realm of God until you've been born... again? From above?"** It can be translated either way. Does it really matter?

Nicodemus knows the language.

It wasn't new with Jesus or to Nicodemus.

It was the language they used when a gentile became a Jew... a radical new person, kind of "changed."

And Jesus was saying, **"That's where you are Nicodemus, that's what you need."**

It feels so impossible to Nicodemus... like climbing back into his mother's womb. That hard. It's so hard to make changes, right? Even when you long for them and know you need them.

You want to be different...

need to be...

probably even prayed for it.

Nicodemus knew Paul's dilemma... **"The things I want to do, I just can't do."** I'm thinking Nicodemus is giving Jesus one of those... **"I've tried everything and can't make this happen,"** kind of looks. "May as well crawl into my mother's womb."

Jesus sees the frustration bordering on despair in his eyes... and again pierces through it all... explaining his diagnosis.

You have to be born of water... (cleansing)... and spirit... inner transformation. And Nicodemus... the Spirit can only give birth to spirit. It's just the way it is... It's like the wind... blowing where it will. You just never know, really."

Well, that's not what he wanted to hear. **You have to be born from above Nicodemus but there's nothing much you can do to make it happen...**

I never really heard it that way... I always heard, with "Just as I Am" playing in the background that it was my decision...my choice. Now, at my age I'm hearing Jesus say, it's not in my control... it's like the wind.

A strange thing happens in this story. It doesn't end. Jesus starts talking... saying things that are so familiar, like "For God so loved the world..." And John just sort of leaves Nicodemus sitting out in the dark... he doesn't wrap it up. In John's other stories, there's always a nice ending, where Jesus says something like, **"Go and sin no more,"** Or **"Take off the grave cloths and let him go."**

Not here... it's like John forgets him or says... "To be continued... tune in next week."

He leaves us with this seeker sitting in the dark saying, **"how can this be."** Presumably because that's okay... John saying to us... not everyone's story can be tied up... We don't all get this on the first run and that's okay. Jesus doesn't rush Nicodemus through the four spiritual laws and get him to say the sinner's prayer at the back of the track.

He is a man...a human being with a story... a particular story... God has been at work in his life all along and God is not about to stop.

Can you hear that today? It is one real clear distinction between Christianity and many other world religions. God is personal... knows you... your story... and is active in your life. Everything that has happened is known... not planned... known. In all of it, God is drawing you to Himself.

Your life,

your story is unique

and God deals with you in a unique way.

We see that in Jesus in the gospels. He gives to each person what they need. To one who has been shamed and shunned all her life... he simply lets her wash his feet. To another he says, **"Go sell everything and follow me."** To another, at another time, a particular time, he says, **"Quit sinning or something really bad is going to happen to you."**

To the closed-minded, he screams... **"Blind guides... white washed tombs full of dead men's bones."**

To one in repentant agony, he utters, **“Today, you will be with me in paradise.”**

The great teacher knows... every story is unique... never before lived. And just as Jesus met folks like Nicodemus where they were... and gave them what they needed... he’s doing that with you. **Now there is a man... a woman...a student...a retiree... there is you. There is Nicodemus.**

He’s standing in the dark... scratching his head, trying to understand what it means that what he most needs from God is completely beyond his grasp. He can’t grab it... He can’t get it with his head.

That’s exactly what Nicodemus had to hear.

Maybe not what you’re needing to hear. Maybe your word is like the one the Woman at the Well hears in chapter four... **“Did you know, there is something within you that can spring up and give you all you’re thirsty for?”**

Maybe you need to hear Jesus saying, **“Where are your condemners? I don’t condemn you... it’s not what I do.”** Is that your story?

Or is yours like those who know that they know and that they see... and you’ll have to hear Jesus saying, **“You’re really blind... because you’re so sure you see everything so clearly.”**

I don’t know what your story is... But I do believe that the Lord of all Creation, known in Christ, knows you and is speaking a specific and particular word to you.

... For this time...

and this place in your journey.

John does imply that Nicodemus’ is a story “to be continued.” And it was. There are two more scenes in John’s gospel, which alone tells of his journey with Jesus.

A while later, down at the Sanhedrin, they’re all up in arms about Jesus and talking about getting rid of him. Nicodemus rises to his feet to say, **“Do you mean to tell me, you’re going to condemn him without ever even listening to him.”**

I wonder what happened in Nicodemus’s heart in that moment... standing there... courageously out on a limb.

Are there some things we can only know as we take a step in faith... risk some?

Is there a knowing that comes only from standing for what is right?

Is Nicodemus in spiritual labor pains?

The last scene John gives us in Nicodemus’s story... is after the crucifixion. Other gospels mention that a guy named Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus.

Do you know that John alone tells us he was accompanied by Nicodemus... and John winks at us and writes, **“who had earlier come to him at night?”**

We don’t know where Nicodemus was on that sad night... whether or not he was still in the dark. We do know that he was as close to the suffering of Christ and the death of Christ as he could get and I have a great hunch, that because of it, he was on his way into the light. Copyright, Burt L. Burlison, 2005