

John 3:1-17

“Conversations at night”

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This year’s Lenten Midweek theme is “Holy Conversations with Jesus,” reminding us that there is no time or place where we cannot talk with Jesus. The unique feature of this year’s midweek series is that we have an opportunity to dive more deeply into Sunday’s gospel text from just a few days ago. More time helps us think about these gospel conversations with Jesus in ways that remind us of our own conversations with him.

Tonight’s reading contains the story of Nicodemus and Jesus, which pointedly tells us, “*He came to Jesus by night...*” Tonight, I would like to emphasize the words, “*by night,*” because the night is an important time in our daily rhythm of waking and sleeping. The night can be both a time of quiet and a time of disquiet. The night occupies that liminal position in the day as a threshold between waking and sleeping. The night is that liminal boundary when we can be confronted with a view into ourselves that we may not see or want to see during the day. The night may bring sleeplessness because of fears, doubts, or questions we are struggling with. Though the night can be an unsettling time, it can also be a moment of opportunity, offering a path into prayer which is, of course, conversation with Jesus.

Years ago, when I was a young missionary working in Tokyo, a missionary friend and colleague was diagnosed with esophageal cancer and was admitted to the National Cancer Center Hospital in Tokyo. My friend was at the end of his missionary career and rather than looking forward to retirement, he was now struggling with the challenge of illness.

Long before internet blogging and texting, my friend stayed in touch with friends and family in Japan and the States through letters sent by his wife. I was on this mailing list and one of the letters I received from him has stayed with me because it contained the story of how he was visited one night by a fellow patient, who, he wrote, “came to see me like Nicodemus by night.” Reflecting on this visit, my friend realized that this fellow patient knew that he was a Christian and a pastor. This fellow patient came to my friend seeking to know more about Jesus and the light of hope he also saw shining in my friend.

This fellow patient asked about life after death, in essence asking the question of Nicodemus, “*How can these things be?*” I mention this story because each of us have met people whose faith supports and leads them even in difficult times. At that time years ago, Buddhist priests didn’t really make hospital calls, and non-Christian hospitals didn’t have a chaplain’s office. As you might imagine or know, the hospital can be a lonely place. My friend

reflected that though he himself was a patient, he wanted to share the hope that was in him in Jesus Christ.

My friend's name was Richard Nelson. Richard and his wife Irene were two people who were Jesus Christ to me on my journey and part of the reason I entered seminary. Richard was able to help a fellow patient by night because he himself had spent a lifetime in prayer with Jesus. You see, just because we call ourselves Christians doesn't automatically mean that we spend much time with Jesus in prayer. Nicodemus' question, "*How can these things be?*" is a good question for each of us during Lent.

The heart of Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus is found in the words, "*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*" (Jn. 3:16). To believe in Jesus is to have union with him. Believing in him is a profound trust in him in which we place ourselves and all our hopes and fears in him. To believe "*in him*" means to be found *in him*. The kingdom of God and eternal life are incomprehensible without him. We might imagine such heavenly things, but we will never know about eternal life without believing *in him*, because believing in him leads to eternal life. He is the way to eternal life.

Each of us are created for transcendence and union with God. Yet unfortunately, the world is also a noisy place, causing no small amount of disquiet and noise within us. Nicodemus came seeking the quiet and reassurance that only conversation with Jesus can give.

Jesus lives to live in you. He lives raised to tell you about heavenly things and to give to you, eternal life. He calls you to follow him, denying yourself and carrying the cross. Prayer is much more than simply words. Prayer is a trusting journey with God. Prayer is that liminal boundary leading from earthly things to heavenly things – to eternal life.

Though we possess knowledge about many things, when we think about God we realize that much of our education hasn't really equipped us to seek times of quiet listening and prayerful conversation with God. Carving out such moments of quiet is certainly not easy. In our go-go, workaholic, "I'm always busy" world, being quiet may be seen as self-indulgent, or even, as a lazy and negligent use of time. However, this is how we approach Jesus in prayer.

This is what makes this story of coming to Jesus at night so powerful, because in the darkness of night we meet the light of the world, Jesus. In meeting Jesus, we meet our true selves, not the false self, the mask, the persona we wear during the day at work, with family, or in community.

In the quiet of night, we meet our real self, the person with needs, questions, and concerns about eternal life. In prayer, we meet the God who is often hidden from us. There is a verse in

Isaiah 45 that through Martin Luther I have become fond of, “*Thou art truly a God who hidest thyself...*” (Luther knew the Latin, “*Vere tu es Deus absconditus...*,” Is.45:15). Those Latin words, *Deus absconditus* mean the “hidden God.” Like Moses climbing the holy mountain to meet God in the darkness of a holy cloud, like Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night, or like that man at the hospital visiting my friend Richard, we approach the hidden God, often at night in the quiet of prayer.

In prayer, the hidden God is revealed to us in Jesus and his love for us. Prayer is a bit of an art; it isn’t simply memorized words. Like Nicodemus’ question, “*How can these things be?*” we also have our own nighttime questions. We may say, “Lord, I have no idea. Lord, I have nothing. Lord, I feel like nothing. Please help me, fill me, heal me.” Prayer is that moment of grace that calms the emptiness of your being, filling you again with grace and purpose.

It is interesting that Nicodemus knew Jesus would be available at night. Jesus is always with you, but you may not hear or see him because of your own disquiet amid the world’s noise.

Make Lent a find time for quiet with Jesus, and when you are next awoken at night, turn to him in prayer.

Then when you are asked by someone to offer them light and hope in the darkness, you will be able to share Jesus, who now lives hidden in you.

Believe in him and you will never perish. Believe in him and you will have eternal life.
Amen.