

Nick at Nite
 Sermon on John 3:1-18
 Julie McCain, March 16, 2014

Please pray with me: Speak, O Lord, in words that we can hear. Open our hearts to your word, and plant the light of your truth deep in our hearts. Amen

The blinds are all closed,
 And the streets are mostly clear,
 As Nicodemus navigates the shadows of the night to approach Jesus.
 This man's life is nothing if not secure:

He has an important job he's been working hard for all his life,
 The respect of the entire community,
 And more than enough money to go around,

Every other meeting this powerful man has is by the light of day.
 But this one is different.

At this meeting, Nicodemus has a lot to lose.

If just one person sees him approach Jesus, rumors will start.

His reputation, his place in society, his job—all these are on the line.

There is so much at stake for Nicodemus that we have to imagine that his questions, his curiosity, and his discomfort are all gurgling to the surface as he sneaks out that night to find Jesus.

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent from God,” he says.

It's like saying: we know that you are one of us, and we could do great things together.

And the story would make so much sense if Jesus patted Nicodemus on the back, and said “well, you're close, but actually, I'm also the Messiah.” Nicodemus could fall down at Jesus' feet, and my sermon would be about how Jesus loves and encourages us no matter what.

And Jesus does love us no matter what.

But pious, well-meaning Nicodemus is probably pretty pleased with his life just the way it is. He's not looking for someone to come in and shake things up.

He's not looking to be reborn or have some Spirit come in and blow where it chooses.

He's looking for Jesus, a teacher, who is just like all the teachers who have gone before him.

→And we can be a lot like Nicodemus. Sometimes we want Jesus, but only on our terms. We want Jesus to comfort us, and to love us, but not to change us, because change is hard.

I googled American values, and the very first value on several different lists was personal control over our own environment and destiny. Our culture was built on the concept of the self-made person, and we like to think that we control our own destinies, that we can choose to do whatever we want with our lives.

And there's nothing wrong with getting to choose your toothpaste or your neighborhood or your job.

→But there is such a thing as too much control. There is such a thing as clinging too tightly. In my own life, I used to cling quite tightly to a sense of control by planning everything out to the letter, and then always, always sticking to that plan... but the problem was that when something changed unexpectedly, I panicked.

So what are some other things that you have seen people hold onto too tightly?

-finances, children, job, schedule

Maintaining a tight grip over our lives does two things:

1) First, it can give us a false sense of peace. That peace only comes from our ability to keep our worlds spinning as it should. But whenever we slip up or mess up, that peace comes crashing to the ground, and painfully.

2) And secondly, that tight grip keeps Jesus on the margins of our lives. If, like Nicodemus, we put Jesus in a box and only let him into our lives when it's comfortable for us, it's going to be hard for him to change our hearts and make us new.

So let's return to Nicodemus' story.

Our well intentioned seeker wants affirmation, but Jesus gives him the opposite.

Jesus says: I can't give you what you want, Nicodemus. Following the light of the world means stepping out of the shadows and being changed, and for that to happen you have to let me in!

And all we hear from Nicodemus from here on out are questions:
How can anyone be born after having grown old? And, How can these things be?

When Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born a second time, Nicodemus doesn't say:

Ok! Do it!" He doesn't say: I don't understand, but help me!"

He says: that's impossible... I don't believe it. This is ridiculous.

As Jesus keeps talking, I picture Nicodemus getting a disgruntled or disgusted look on his face, crossing his arms, and taking a step back.

This important community leader, whose name actually means "conqueror of people," is used to having control of his own life... and, well, being born of water and the Spirit, and entering the kingdom of God doesn't sound very comfortable or controllable.

As Jesus tells Nicodemus more and more about what this reborn life will look like... Nicodemus simply loses interest.

He slips into the background of our story because when he stands face-to-face with Jesus, it's not the Jesus he wants.

But at the same time, Jesus gives him everything he needs.

There is, to Nicodemus, and to us, a call to let go. We don't have to hold on so tightly.

For we have been born of water and the spirit, and the Spirit blows where it chooses.

The Spirit blows where it chooses... And that is at once both terrifying and comforting.

With the Spirit blowing where it chooses, I have very little control:

- The Spirit might blow into my heart and take away the resentment and anger I harbor. And I might rather go on harboring it.
- The Spirit might blow into our hearts and we might find our feet moving in the direction of someone new at work or church, or out into the community to serve our neighbors, and it could be that we'd simply rather not!

We know from so many of the stories in the Bible, and from our own stories, that the places the Spirit takes us to are often scary, uncomfortable places, that we would have never dreamed of or chosen for ourselves.

But at the same time, we know the character of that Spirit. We know that we can trust it with our very lives. And the reason is right here in our text. I invite you to open up your lessons in your insert, read John 3:16 & 17 with me:

We can trust the Spirit because it is the Spirit of a God who loved the world so much that he sent his son to die for it. He doesn't come to take the wheel of our lives and drive us off a cliff; He comes to loosen our grip and teach us to trust, and as we do, we'll find God's Spirit filling us with a true and lasting peace that passes all understanding. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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