

Baby steps

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2nd Sunday in Lent - March 5, 2023

Texts: Genesis 12:1-4a, Psalm 121, John 3:1-17

Genesis 12:1-4a - Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come?

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

John 3:1-17 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? "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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."



So what about Nicodemus? Why make a point of coming at night? The common interpretation is that he was afraid to be spotted by his co-religionaries consulting this so-called wonder-worker. But what if Nicodemus is just your ordinary, garden-variety insomniac? What if he is haunted at night by fears and misgivings, by regrets and night terrors? Jesus' own people, the Jews, were walking a tightrope, trying to keep their faith pure and intact and at the same time not offend the Romans to the point of getting obliterated by them. Was this madman Jesus, with his kingdom talk, upsetting that delicate balance? Or could he be speaking truth?

I wonder what was going through Nicodemus's sleepless mind *before* he got up and went in search of Jesus: What's to become of me? What's become of little Israel? Will we survive? Are we being unfaithful to our God? Where will help come from? Would it be better to die than to knuckle under to the Romans? Haunting questions. And reasonable ones.

Those of us who lie awake through the small hours know the truth: no matter how powerful the need to sleep, the Wretcheds and the Dreads are stronger. The Wretcheds are the personal ghosts replaying every dumb thing we've ever done. On the other hand, the Dreads hold the certainty that the minute we actually doze off, all the horrors we've been fending off with the sheer power of our paranoid minds will strike: 5G mind control; Yellowstone erupting; economic collapse. Personal failure.



Makes sense, right? What do you get when you cross an insomniac, a reluctant agnostic, and a dyslexic? A person who lies awake all night torturing herself about whether or not there is a dog.

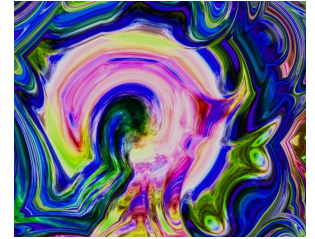
Seriously, what keeps you awake at night? If it's nothing worse than an occasional OD on caffeine, then you don't know what you're missing: it could be the best time of your day.



Ultimately, Nicodemus did the right thing. He went to Jesus. Where I go, too, when I finally remember: there is someone who can banish the demons, silence the shaming voices, soothe away the irrational fears. And even the reasonable doubts. You can recognize someone who has made that nightly visit with God a regular appointment, can't you? My mind goes to Earl

Donner: when I met him he was in his mid-80s, with a thick head of white hair; still tall, not stooped, with mild blue eyes. He was one of the congregation's Stephen Ministers, and a good one, too; a comforting presence for people in any sort of trouble. Earl was not an imposing sort of man; he had been a laborer of some humble category. But spiritually, he was a giant. He often spoke of his nightly conversations with God: they gave him peace, not agitation. He didn't dread his sleepless hours, he treasured them. He went straight to the source of his own comfort and because he did, he could start each day fresh, unburdened. As though born all over again, pure and new.

Maybe reaching for God in the night *is* something like returning to the womb, the idea that Nicodemus found so perplexing. Maybe it's like an unseen umbilical cord made of water and spirit, a lifeline of spiritual breath and nourishment. You are connected but not trapped, held but not bound. Like Spirit herself, you are free to roam as you will, not in spite of that connection but because of it. And, by the way, O you sound all-night sleepers, it can happen at any hour of the day. Insomnia doesn't have to be the entryway.



What is it that Nicodemus tried so hard to understand in Jesus' mysterious words about Spirit, new life, and Jesus' gift? What is there for us to absorb? Is it forgiveness for all the things you regret inflicting on others? Yes, but it's more than that.

Is it release from the shame of failing to live up to your own expectations?

Yes, but it's more than that, too.

Is it assurance that no matter what happens, God will be with you?

Absolutely, but it's still much more.

Is it about moving from a world of black-and-white, wrong and right, into a world of swirling color and moving beauty? Yes, and stirring music, and perfect deliciousness, and more!

Is it that you know eternal life is yours so you can finally begin to take baby steps into this life without fear?

Yes, you can begin to walk forward, but that's not all. Because it's not just about you.

“For God so loved *the world*,” Jesus said, “that he sent his only Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” It's not just about your hurting self growing stronger, braver, but about all things being restored. Dwell on that for a moment. The worst scenario your nighttime fears can conjure, the most horrific scene daytime cable TV can offer, the most broken person or system you can imagine, made whole and beautiful. My favorite verse is the next one:



“God did not send the Son into *the world* to condemn *the world*, but that *the world* might be saved through him.” *The world*. The Greek word is *kosmos*, exactly like the English *cosmos*, meaning *the sum total of everything here and now. No one and nothing left out. The whole world in God's hands. Reborn. Beginning all over new.* Take a minute to ponder that, with the vision of Julian of Norwich, 14th century mystic.

“And in this [vision] God showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, ‘What may this be?’ And it was answered generally thus, ‘It is all that is made.’ I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.”

Image credits:

JESUS MAFA. Nicodemus, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, 1973.

Carmody, Courtney. Whole World in God's Hands, 21st century.

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All others in the public domain.

Prayers

God, our keeper, you watch over us so that the sun does not strike us by day nor the moon by night. Watch over our waking and our sleeping; may we at every time and in any distress turn first to you.

God of new beginnings, help us ask questions that will lead us down right paths to deeper faith, willing to trust and try new ventures in serving you and one another.

For our brothers and sisters whose lives are broken by war and natural disaster; for all whose lives are impoverished materially or spiritually; for all who are oppressed because of race, gender, or ethnicity - may we be part of your plan to build a new humanity of caring.

For those closest to our hearts who suffer: those who are ill, isolated, despairing, or in grief. Remind us that death itself is only the beginning of new life in you. We pray in Jesus' name, and as he taught us:

Our Mother and Father in heaven, holy be your name.
Impose your reign that we may do your will,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today this one day's bread.
Forgive our wrongs
as we forgive those who do wrong against us.
Save us from our temptations
and keep us from doing evil,
For the Realm, the power, and the glory are yours,
Now and forever. Amen