

"Listen to the Nudges at Night"

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John 3:1-10

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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Nicodemus Visits Jesus

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. **2** 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."

3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being **born from above**."[Ⓜ] **4** 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?"

5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. **6** What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."[Ⓜ] **7** Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You[Ⓜ] must be born from above.'[Ⓜ]

8 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."[Ⓜ] **9** Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" **10** Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

¹⁰⁻¹² Jesus said, "You're a respected teacher of Israel and you don't know these basics? Listen carefully."

I. EVER BEEN DISTURBED IN THE NIGHT?

Have you ever been disturbed in the night? Woken up—maybe by something you can't even name? Or realize you've been tossing and turning, perseverating and

puzzling over things for hours—half awake and half asleep?!

I have. More times than I can count. This week, in fact. Last night, Tuesday night, as I was writing this sermon in my head and heart. I had been reading too much news from all over the world about rising violence and hatred in every corner; rising death counts from COVID, and fears about things only getting worse, unless we could learn to love one another better.

I was also pondering a response to a person asking me about my views and perspectives—how I had come to them. I realized, in that restless tossing in the night, that I needed to clarify in my own thoughts and in writing for others, why my convictions are what they are. How I understand the Gospel and seek to live it.

So, there, tucked under the covers, typing on my phone, trying not to wake Clarke, I responded to the "why" of my beliefs, actions and convictions:
"Because Jesus wept."

Because, the lens I see the world and the gospel through, leads me to ask this question—every hour and in every decision:

"What Would Jesus Do?"

I realized, in that moment, that remembering my identity in Christ in my baptismal vows, clarifying my bedrock faith convictions and "taking it to the Lord in

prayer,” were what I needed to do whenever disturbed in the night by too many concerns.

I closed my phone and my eyes, and fell back asleep, praying. (I’ll try to remember that next time, too!)

Eric Elnes, in *Gifts of the Dark Wood*, tells the story of his friend Bruce who couldn’t sleep one night. A friend was on his mind, whom he hadn’t seen or heard from in years, and who lived two hours away. Try as he might, he couldn’t shake the feeling that this friend desperately needed him. He finally got up and told his wife he was going to visit (she thought he was crazy, of course!) and he drove the two hours.

The friend, surprised, greeted him and assured Bruce he was just fine, and they visited over coffee for an hour before Bruce went back home. Three months later, the friend showed up unexpectedly at Bruce’s home and told him he had not been honest with him that night. He *wasn’t* fine. He was, in fact, sitting at the table with a loaded revolver, about to end his life, which seemed to have no purpose.

Bruce’s unexplained visit because a life-changing and life-saving Sweet Spot moment for him, when he knew, without a doubt, that God cared for him and had a purpose for his life. He decided to stick around and found out what it was!

Elnes describes these “nudges at night:”
The Holy Spirit frequently throws us intuitions that come

from a source completely beyond ourselves. Often these intuitions or gut instincts seem confusing.

Yet we recognize that it’s our soul responding to Spirit when the intuition, though strange or unexpected (e.g. “Go visit your friend who lives two hours away in the middle of the night”), hits us precisely where we live.

We experience it as a sweet spot moment. We move from fear to flow, discovering a power at work within and beyond us that is far greater than we are, yet is intimately connected to us as well. We discover what it means to be fully human.) (*Gifts of the Dark Wood*, p. 63)

II. NICK WAS DISTURBED IN THE NIGHT

Nicodemus, a religious leader in Jesus’ day, was disturbed in the night. He came, under cover of darkness, in search of Jesus. Somehow he knew that Jesus was the real deal. A rabbi truly sent from God.

Nick was a Pharisee! He was on the “other side” of the political spectrum from Jesus, of a different class and “party,” if you will, but not from a different religious tradition. He was one of the “good leaders” of the Jewish community that Jesus was a part of, along with his disciples.

Why did he come “under cover of darkness?”
What was he seeking? What was he afraid to ask?
Afraid to be *seen* searching for? *Who* was he afraid might *see* him stepping out and looking for something more in life? How might he pay the price if caught

looking for Jesus' Path that might be different in any way from his own religion and tribe?

Nicodemus found Jesus. And found some answers, there in the night. Were they what he was looking for? It's not clear! It certainly gave him pause—caused him puzzlement and consternation. What did Jesus *mean*, you must to be “born again”; start fresh, choose a different path? Nick's nudge in the night was certainly a mixed bag.

We've been asking the question: “Where is God When Life Gets Hard?” Could that be in the nudges at night that lead us to seeking a different approach to things, like Nicodemus did?

Even when those nudges urge us to “come across the lines” of different classes, castes and political parties from ours, seeking Jesus and his teachings more intently?

III. CHURCH DISTURBED IN THE NIGHT

Beyond our individuals lives, do we also need to ponder this question collectively? As a faith leader, I am hearing and feeling the conviction of many, many souls that the Church Universal is hearing God calling in the night right now, disturbing our quiet sleepiness. Hearing and sensing that the Church needs to be born again.

Needs to turn around, embark down a new path. Change direction to follow Jesus' Path—rather than our own. To look honestly at what we have constructed for

ourselves, as we've created God in our own image and likeness, and put the Divine conveniently in a box. For centuries.

We have lived far too long in a place where our faith and scripture *comfort* us in our own complacency but don't *challenge* us to see the radical nature of Jesus' message and movement.

This new path for the Church means getting back to the Bible with new eyes, listening with new ears to the still-speaking and always-revealing God.

This means taking a path for our feet and hearts to owning our own inbred racism, white privilege, white supremacy and fragility, and making that commitment for the rest of our lives—to love God, our neighbor and ourselves more fully and profoundly.

One part of this new path is the urgent call to do everything in our power to *dismantle* that system of oppression, resist the evil spirit and wind that has waged violence upon us, and seeks to continue to run rampant. We as Christians of every nation need to boldly step out and stand up with everything in our being to resist evil and violent forces and to follow Jesus' Way instead.

For, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Do we live as if we truly believe this? “All ONE in Christ Jesus.” Not just some?

IV. NUDGES IN THE NIGHT:

Ever been disturbed in the night? By a friend in need, or the suffering of strangers? Who is crying out to *you* in the night? Is it everyone who is hurting in our country these days, due to illness, despair, loss of livelihood and home? Due to callousness by friend and foe, leaders and neighbors alike?

Where does God call *us*—in the night or in the day—to come seeking, when we are restless, sleepless in Buena Vista? Do we listen to the nudges in the night? In our dreams, our homes in quarantine, the streets of our communities?

Who might need you to make that call, send that text, write that supportive email, card or letter—encouraging their heart when it is worn out or weary? Who might need us to wake from our comfortable, warm slumber and join that cause for justice? To work toward ending suffering—after all, that’s all that justice is—not such a radical idea!

Who in this world, right now, needs you to reach out—beyond your comfort zone—even when it seems illogical and foolish? Even when you’re afraid you might be bothering them—calling too late or too early—maybe bothering Jesus!

Even if you just need to confess, as we *all* do, that the path we’ve been on is not “life-giving” for all. That we and our way forward as a culture and religion need to be born again. Reset. Started fresh—with lament,

remorse, apology, empathy, sympathy, reparation, reconciliation, and renewal.

And, we need to start by seeking forgiveness—from those we have harmed—either intentionally or by being part of a system that caused harm while we were silent. Sleeping.

We all—especially people of faith who claim to follow the religion of Jesus Christ—need to listen to the disturbances in the night, wake up, follow the nudges, like Nicodemus, and come to Jesus.

Like Nick, to repent of religious beliefs and practices that were more of Pharisees than of God. Seek in Jesus Christ and his Path of Love & Compassion what we are seeking—for our lives and in our hearts. Confess our participation in paths of harm for too many of God’s Beloved Children, for far too long.

Ask forgiveness, seek awareness and understanding of others’ who are crying out in the night over centuries to be treated as the Imago Dei—made in the image of God that they are.

⁵⁻⁶ Jesus said, “You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom.

⁷⁻⁸ “So don’t be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be ‘born from above’—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it

comes from or where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone 'born from above' by the wind of God, the Spirit of God."

As we come to Jesus and seek to be born "from above"—born of the Spirit, humbling ourselves in every way, we seek the life-giving way and wind for all—neighbor and stranger alike. And, for our sacred earthly home.

Amanda Gorman, wise, young and mighty poet, who spoke at the inauguration this week, concluded her hopeful and challenging message to us with these words—as we listen to the Sacred nudges in the night and seek to be reborn from above, and step into the Light:

"When day comes,
we step out of the shade aflame and unafraid.
The new dawn blooms as we free it.
For there is always light.
If only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to **be** it."

May we hear the Voice of God—in the night, in the day; in the waning shadows as a new Day is breaking. As individuals and as participants in the human community. May we be Born Again Bearers of Light onto that new path and into a bright new dawn, as followers of Christ. Amen.