

“Faith for the Journey”

There is a saying that no question is a dumb question. All questions are valid. Some say you may be asking a question that others need the answer to, but they are afraid to ask or do not know how to ask. However, as many of us have experienced, not all people adhere to that maxim. If you ask a question that others find dense, they may make fun of you. If a question doubts someone’s authority, they may seek to humiliate you. If they just don’t want to answer the question they may ignore you. These responses can leave us no better informed, and a little worse for the wear.

I learned these various lessons in my youth. I also learned that the best question may be the unasked question. I might be in the dark but at least for the moment my ego was intact. No one was ridiculing me. I could be blissfully ignorant. If I really needed the answer, I could ask in private or look it up.

I think Abram, soon to be Abraham, and I may have shared a philosophy about question asking. Throughout the book of Genesis Abram goes along to get along especially when God tells him to do something. Today’s reading is our initial introduction to Abram. Immediately God directs him to, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” We might have questions but not Abram.

Abram does not ask why me? What clothes to pack? What food to take? What direction should I head in? Abram hears God’s command and responds by packing up all his possessions including livestock and family and setting out. This huge array of humanity and livestock just starts walking. Abram’s trust in God may seem naïve or foolish. We don’t know why he does not ask questions or challenge God (something he will do later). We know only that he follows God’s directive and gets going.

Nicodemus in the passage we heard from the Gospel of John is a quite different fellow from Abram. He has lots of questions, but he also may share the philosophy of Abram and me. That is, he does not ask his questions of Jesus in the village square or the counsel of the Sanhedrin. Indeed, when he decides to ask questions of Jesus, he asks them when no one is around, or it is unlikely that anyone will see them or overhear them.

Nicodemus has questions and wants answers. He also knows that his fellow members of the Sanhedrin (a religious/legal body that adjudicated transgressions of the Torah and other religious laws and precepts) view Jesus as a problem. He is a rabble rouser, a thorn in the side of the Sadducees, and viewed by their Roman overlords as a troublemaker and possibly a dissident who wants to start a rebellion against Rome. Nicodemus wants answers but he is no fool. He will see Jesus at night when it is safer to do so.

For us Nicodemus’ meeting with Jesus is troubling. It is only recounted in John’s Gospel which means we have no other account that we can compare it to. It also happens at night when things are shadowy. Nighttime traditionally has the aura of things only partially seen or understood. The tricky light and shadows do not allow for a clear experience. Night is also the time of danger from those who would use the dark to conceal nefarious intentions.

However, in the concealing night Jesus reveals deeper aspects of God to Nicodemus and to us. Sadly, despite being a learned man and member of the religious

elite, Nicodemus is confused by Jesus' metaphorical responses. In the twilight Nicodemus becomes a literalist. As a scholar he should be able to understand metaphors and interpret them. However, in this situation he is either not able to, or he is playing dumb to make Jesus explain more thoroughly.

Whatever Nicodemus' motivation, it draws out of Jesus profound metaphors about new birth in God and the Spirit of God. Jesus teaches us that we can be reborn spiritually through the water and the Spirit, what we call baptism. We are not only washed of our sins but symbolically die in the water and rise a new spiritual person. We are born anew by our mother, the Holy Spirit.

We also learn that the Spirit moves like the wind. We do not know where it comes from or where it is going. We do not see the wind, but we see the results of it as it moves the leaves, bends trees, and stirs up the dust. Neither wind nor spirit are magic, but they are mysterious in their movements and in the way they affect us.

We cannot thank Nicodemus enough for enquiring of Jesus. We cannot thank him enough for asking the hard or stupid questions. We cannot thank him enough for helping us on our spiritual journey by setting an example of an enquiring heart.

We also know that this encounter with Jesus is not the end of Nicodemus' story. We see in his later appearances in the Gospel of John that this encounter has changed him. The next time we see him he asks a question of the Sanhedrin. The body is ready to convict Jesus, but Nicodemus reminds them that, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing."<sup>1</sup> They taunt him of being a Galilean and remind him that the scriptures do not predict a prophet rising from Galilee. We note Nicodemus is now brave enough to speak about Jesus in front of his colleagues.

Finally, Nicodemus participates in a public act for Jesus. In this instance Nicodemus brings an exorbitant amount, one hundred pounds of aloes and myrrh for anointing Jesus' body. He joins Joseph of Arimathea in taking Jesus' body down from the cross and putting it in the tomb.<sup>2</sup> They do this in daylight and in public. Nicodemus publicly defies those who condemned Jesus. We see Nicodemus maturing in his faith and belief in Jesus.

Nicodemus' faith journey is difficult and anguished. Abram's journey of faith in God is also full of trials, pain, and disappointment. His will end in the near death of his son. Journeys of faith can be difficult. Our time in the desert can also be a trial. May our Lenten journey lead to unknown but profound changes in our love of God and faith in Jesus. May it lead us out of darkness into light. May the faith of Abram and the searching of Nicodemus become examples and guides for us as our journey continues.

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<sup>1</sup> John 7:51 NRSVUE

<sup>2</sup> John 19:39-40