

Secret Agents No More—Revised
 John 3:1-7
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 Church of the Incarnation
 Lent II year A
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In a time when loneliness and isolation
 are plaguing our young people, middle aged and old;
 In a time in our country
 where our foreign policy,
 can seemingly be boiled down to might makes right,
 move fast and break things,
 blow things up because you can...
 In a time when so much
 of the polarization of our country
 could be bridged if we had
 mechanism, means and inclination
 to listen to people with different perspectives,
 I'm wondering how our congregations,
 might be bases of faith, communities of care,
 and anchors of resilience and resistance in our neighborhoods.

I'm wondering, in our chaotic world,
 in a country where the false narrative
 of white Christian Nationalism
 is parading around as orthodox Christianity,
 rather than a narrow, idolatrous political ideology,
 I'm wondering if we in the Episcopal church
 might take this moment to be secret agents no more?

Might it be time, might it be well past time,
 for us to come out of the progressive Christianity Closet and
 boldly embody the life, death, resurrection: the hope of Jesus Christ?

I'm wondering if we might, learn from and embrace the pharisee Nicodemus as the patron
 saint of the Episcopal Church?

Think about it—he starts out slow. He starts out a quiet, a learned fellow, who is low key
 about his interest in Jesus of Nazareth. But then, wow, at the end, (which turns out is the
 beginning) he and everyone else knows where he stands...

Let me offer you some background .

Nicodemus is

a Pharisee—a learned religious authority—
a man of ways and means

who comes to Jesus in the night,
under the cover of darkness.

He will not risk people knowing that he maybe might believe...that he might believe in
Jesus, that he might believe he is the son of God.

He comes to Jesus looking to get a verbal confirmation to the question—
are you the one?

Are you the Messiah?

Nicodemus says,

“It seems from all you’ve been doing
—you’ve got a very close connection to the Lord...”

And then rather than a yes or no—

a simple answer—

thank you very much

—Jesus tells him about being born again—
from above.

An answer, that quite frankly,

makes about as much sense

as a guy standing for a whole game

in the football end zone with a placard that reads JOHN 3:16.

Nicodemus

isn’t sure what to do with the answer or the encounter.

Jesus isn’t going easy on him.

Jesus continues on,

“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...”

Nicodemus leaves the encounter—

perplexed, perhaps more confused

than when he began—but also clearly intrigued.

He came looking for a simple, quick answer.

So he can believe. But that’s not how faith happens.

Then or now.

Much like learning to walk as infants,

it doesn’t come right away.

Walking takes work,

begins with crawling and falling,

scooting and rolling,

and eventually the muscles learn.

Faith, belief are like that, they are not quickly had.

But what we know about our friend Nicodemus, and this is why I want him to be our patron Saint

is that he doesn't go away forever.
He's one of those scriptural characters
who continues periodically
to walk across the biblical stage.

Clearly he goes away and thinks about it.

Four chapters later—
the crowd following Jesus is growing.
Those in power are nervous.
The rif-raff are gathering
—rules—customs and traditions are being questioned.
So the Pharisees plot to arrest Jesus
—apprehend him—
they go so far as to send
the temple police after him—
but they come back without him saying,
“Never have we heard someone teach like this...”
The Pharisees furious—
demand that Jesus be found guilty—
but then Nicodemus—one of their own—
quietly, succinctly uses his knowledge of the law—
to save Jesus, (at least temporarily)he says,
“Our law does not judge people
without first giving them a hearing
to find out what they are doing does it?”

Nicodemus—questioning—
wondering—but more importantly—not giving up on Jesus.
His pondering continues.
Note he is now helping him out in a public forum.
Then several chapters later, Jesus is dead on the cross.
But who goes to Pilate to claim his body?

Joseph of Arimethea— and
Nicodemus— are the ones who risk their lives
and their reputations
to claim the body of the treasonous preacher.
They claim his body
from Pilate himself
and bury him—
Nicodemus bringing and anointing Jesus' body
with a hundred pounds of oil and herbs.

Nicodemus keeps coming back—
 asking—testing—
 seeing—and eventually believing.
 Enough to risk it all. Public disgrace handling
 Jesus' dead body.

But none of it happens instantaneously—
 readily or automatically.
 Faith is not flipped on
 like an electrical switch.
 It is nurtured, grown and worked at—
 much like the muscles we build in our body.

Nicodemus comes to belief in Christ slowly,
 gathering data, reasoning and wondering
 and then, when it counts,
 he risks his reputation for his growing faith.

We do not hear from scripture,
 but we can only imagine the look on his face,
 when the news arrives,
 that very tomb in which he laid,
 and then anointed Jesus' dead crucified body,
 is now empty.
 We can only imagine how he feels
 as what he thought was an end
 is now a new beginning.

That is what I long for us.
 That we ask our questions of Jesus,
 go deep in scripture, venture into prayer together
 and ruminate, contemplate on the answer we find
 and then for us to come out as believers.
 Using our faith, as followers of Jesus,
 to stand and witness
 in fierce opposition to those who would say,
 you can be a Christian and think it's fine,
 to arrest and detain people without warrant or trial.
 I want us to be overt about our faith in Jesus Christ
 and witness against those who say, "Might is right,"
 "This is ours"
 And instead, embody what Jesus Christ lived and died and rose again for:
 "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
 "You shall welcome the stranger."
 "When you reached out to the least of these you did it to me."
 "Blessed are the peacemakers."

Let us please be like Nicodemus, let us come with our doubts, ask our questions, learn and grow and then may we embody boldly our faith in Christ. Let us be Christians in the world. The world needs us, followers of the Nazarian,

Let us be secret agents no more.

Amen.