

Sermon: A Knock at Midnight

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17**

A Knock at Midnight is the title of an essay by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His essay is about the parable of the persistent friend who comes looking for bread at midnight because he has nothing to serve to a visitor (Luke 11:5-6). It was stolen as the title for this because I imagine that Nicodemus would also come to Jesus at midnight, and of course, he would knock too. Then again, it is said that nothing good happens after midnight.

John lets us know that Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a religious leader, either of which might make him an opponent of Jesus. But then he calls Jesus *Rabbi*, acknowledging that he accepts Jesus as a religious authority too. When he says, ‘we know that you are a teacher who has come from God,’ he may be speaking for the Pharisees who sent him, or he may be speaking for himself, using the royal ‘we’ form of referring to oneself.

He and Jesus engage in a conversation about being born again and being born from above. When Jesus says that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit, he’s talking about baptism, that cleansing ritual that signals your commitment to God. To help clarify the part about the Spirit, he uses the wind as an example: you can’t see it, but you know it’s there. Nicodemus is baffled.

Now, is he baffled because of his unbelief – a bad sign in a religious leader – or is he simply close-minded to Jesus’ teaching, making him unable to comprehend?

Using the royal ‘we’ himself, Jesus tries to help him out, saying: ‘we speak of what we *know* and testify to what we have *seen*, but you don’t get it, Nic; just wait until we get to the tough stuff.’

And that’s the last we hear of Nicodemus. And when Jesus says, ‘No one has ascended *into* heaven except the one who descended *from* heaven,’ that leaves Elijah out.

Sometimes, we don't speak of what we know; we just start speaking. When a man does it to a woman, she rightly calls it 'mansplaining.'

We see it in the world of sports, where pundit after pundit speculates on what's really going on with Tom Brady, or in politics, when a candidate says what she or he thinks we want to hear, rather than speaking about how their policies will actually work.

Sometimes, we can see right through the things people try to put over on us, and that can be comical. Other times, misinformation can be hurtful at best and dangerous at worst. Should I believe what I'm told, or should I rely on my own lying eyes?

If I can't believe today's weather report, how am I going to believe Jesus?

Now compare Nicodemus' unbelief to Abram. Today's short passage from Genesis is full of grace in two parts: God's command and God's promise. The grace comes from Abram's complete trust and reliance – what we call faith – in God.

Abram's story begins just a few verses earlier when his father Terah leads him and his family out of Ur in Mesopotamia to go to Canaan. But they stall out on the way and settle in Haran, also in Mesopotamia. The journey only resumes after Terah dies.

The reading can be summed up in this way: The Lord said to Abram, 'Go;' so Abram went. Without a word, without question but with absolute trust in God, Abram went. And what is most remarkable is that his nephew Lot went with him. Why? He went, and the whole family with them, because Lot trusted in Abram.

Thus, begins what is called the Abraham Cycle (Genesis 11-25), told in fourteen chapters, in what is a mostly symmetrical and very complex bit of storytelling.

By the way, the reference to Moses lifting up the serpent in John comes from Numbers 21:9 and it symbolizes a belief in the relationship between snakes and healing – think of the modern-day doctors' symbol: a staff or rod, with a snake curled around it.¹ John compares that belief in healing to belief in Jesus bringing eternal life.

And just about every football stadium in the country has seen someone, at one time or another, holding up a sign with the verse 'John 3:16' printed on it. This verse has nothing to do with football. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world because God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. But that's way too long to put on a sign at a football game.

The point of these readings – and most of the readings in Lent – is for us to look to God with a deepened sense of trust. Abraham is judged to be a righteous person, which is someone who stands in a right relationship to God. Not a bad place to be. But God’s call to Abraham was a continuing one, with God calling him to follow and trust every step of the way.

Ultimately, God’s call is always a call for us to step out of our comfort zone. When my call came to me, not as a still, quiet voice but more like a divine 2x4 to the back of my head, it was not a call to pastoral ministry. It was a call to go to seminary. That was only step one, like Abram’s call to go to Canaan; get there, implied the Lord, and await further instructions.

In John’s Gospel, believing and doing go together. Nicodemus lives in the spiritual darkness until the end of the story, when he and Joseph of Arimathea, also a secret disciple of Jesus, come for his body to bury him (John 19:38-39). Having faith in Jesus is not just about what you think but also about what you hold in your heart and about what you do with your life. Believing is just as hard as being human. Nicodemus did not ask to be rescued. We never know if or how he resolved for himself the things that Jesus told him.

But, like many of us, he was searching for answers before he eventually came to love this man who saw everything so clearly.

Amen.

¹ It is the staff or rod of the ancient mythical god of medicine. His Greek name was Asklepios and his Roman name Aesculapius.