

**John 3:1-17**     *Afraid in the Dark*

March 8, 2020

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

**Narrator:** Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him,

**Nicodemus:** 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:** Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.

**Nicodemus:** How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into their mother's womb and be born?

**Jesus:** 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. Don't 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:** How can these things be?

**Jesus:** 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 Humanity. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Humanity be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that God gave the 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.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jesus, I feel so tired—and it seems as though I get more tired every day. It's nothing that a little sleep wouldn't take care of, but as you know, sleep has never been my friend. Just about every night I lie down, anticipating sleep, but it just doesn't come.

I'm alright during the day—I have my tasks to keep me busy, and they're important tasks, too, thank God. You'd think I'd be content. You'd think I'd be at peace with my life—but then, when I lie down, all I feel is this emptiness, this restlessness, this dread—and the next thing you know, I'm tossing and turning again.

That's why I came to you that night, Jesus. Another sleepless night. But that night, as I lay staring at the ceiling, I started thinking about you. I'd heard about your signs—the wine at Cana (so much joy!), the overturning of the moneychangers' tables (so much zeal)! And I'd seen you healing the sick, heard you preaching in

the synagogue. There was something so alive about you—a burning, a passion, that I don't think I've ever felt. And so, that night when I couldn't sleep, I decided to go and talk to you, to see if what I'd felt from afar was just as real close up.

And it was. “No one can see the reign of God without being born from above,” you said. And it was so clear that you *had* been born from above—that you knew just what it felt like to have the Spirit blowing wild and free in your life. And from the way my heart leapt within me, I knew that my own spirit wanted that same freedom, that same life.

But I didn't grab onto that life. I didn't take you up on that offer. We talked awhile longer, then I just went back home, back to my sleepless bed. And I'm only now beginning to figure out why.

You see, I've seen this before. I'm a teacher of Israel, I've studied the history, I've read the scriptures, and it's all happened before. You're a great teacher, Jesus. A true person of God. I can feel the holiness all about you—but there have been others before you. Other charismatic leaders who've called on people to bring in a new age. And the people flock to them—it's going to be a new day, a new life, a new world! And then what happens? Most of the time they just get slaughtered in the street. Did they think the powers-that-be were just going to pack up and leave town?

But even if that doesn't happen, even if a movement seems to take hold, eventually the first leader dies, new leaders step in, and after a while what started as a revolution just becomes another institution. The freshness goes away. The excitement, the adventure, the vision go away. All that's left is just a new status quo.

Meanwhile, the poor are still poor, the downtrodden are still downtrodden.

So when you said that we all needed to be born again, and I asked, "How can anyone be born again after having grown old?" I wasn't playing dumb. I knew what you meant, but how can anyone trust a promise of new life when we've been around long enough to see what the world is like? The world is a place that kills hope—it doesn't nurture it. The world is a place that boxes up freedom—it doesn't set it loose. The world is a place that resists any change that will shake things up too much. And most of us are too weak or scared to do anything but go along with that.

You see, Jesus, I do believe that the new life you spoke of is real in you. What I'm not sure of, though, is that that new life is transferable to *me*. I envy the Peters and the Jameses and the Marys and the Joannas—all of your followers who have

thrown their whole lives over to you. I envy them—their enthusiasm, their faith, their trust in your vision.

But me—I’ve seen too much, I’ve grown too old. If all this is going to lead to is a new status quo, then why should I take the risk? I’m not doing too badly in *this* status quo. I’ve got a roof over my head, my children have never known hunger, my wife can hold up her head in the marketplace. I have a place of standing in the community—when I speak in the synagogue, people listen.

I think about that often—what a blessing all of those things are. So many people have to watch their children starve, and can’t do a thing about it. So many never have anyone acknowledge their existence—they live, they suffer, they die unseen.

So why isn’t it enough, to have all that I have? Why do I still feel so restless and empty and afraid? Why do I long for something more for myself? Something more for this world?

Another sleepless night, Jesus. Another night, and here I lie.

“The Son of Humanity didn’t come to condemn the world,” you said, “but that the world might be saved through him.”

I want this world to be saved, Jesus. It hurts to see the suffering, but I'm afraid to hope. Afraid of those hopes being crushed once again. Afraid of loving the world, and then getting my heart broken by the hate and ugliness and greed. Still, as I stare at the ceiling, it occurs to me that *I* might be helping to condemn the world. As long as I just lie here. As long as I don't take that first step.

Jesus, I'm afraid of the risk you ask me to take. The risk of throwing myself into what might be a lost cause. But I think I may be more afraid of not taking that risk—of consigning myself to a life of diminished hopes and secret anguish. So I don't know where it will lead. Maybe it won't lead anywhere. But I think I might just get up one more time, Jesus, and go out into the dark night. Maybe I'll find you out there again. And maybe this time—*maybe*—I'll have the courage to go with you.

## **Invitation to Meditation**

Over these weeks of Lent, our Gospel readings are allowing us to listen in on a series of conversations between Jesus and others, and, each week, we'll have time to converse with him ourselves, by responding to a question he poses in scripture.

In the Gospels, there are at least eighteen times where Jesus tells his disciples or an individual, "Don't be afraid," and one time where he asks his disciples, "Why are you afraid?"

So imagine, today, that Jesus is sitting beside you and asking you, "Why are you afraid?"

- What are the things you fear?
- Why do you fear them?

In your bulletin is a colored square of origami paper, and in the pews are some pens. In the three minutes of quiet that follow, please answer the question in words or symbols or pictures. Later, as we leave the service, please drop your paper in one of the baskets by the exits, and they will be origamied and hung up near the cross.

So: Jesus is sitting with you; Jesus is speaking to you; Jesus is asking you:

"Why are you afraid?"

How will you answer him?