



Lutheran Church of the Master, 4800 Ramsey Road, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho
Pastor Neal Buckaloo
Sunday, March 20, 2011
The Second Sunday in Lent

My college roommate was a math major. He would study late into the night to complete a calculus problem. Struggling to understand the problem's inner workings, he would work until the light went on and he had discovered the path to the solution.

The theme of darkness and light is brought out by Jesus in our Gospel lesson today. John 3: ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

While my roommate was not contending with evil while struggling with a calculus problem, his seeking the answer, his persistence, until the truth of the problem was revealed has parallels to our friend Nicodemus, in the Gospel today.

But first, another story. Mathilda Wrede was the daughter of a prison superintendent in Finland. A chance encounter with a prisoner doing yard work on the grounds of her home led her to visit the male prisoners. Mathilda Wrede became well known at Vasa prison through her personal visits and her compassion and understanding. She did not know on this particular day that the dangerous criminal she was to visit had vowed to himself to kill the next person to enter his cell. As Mathilda entered he said, "What a fine visitor I have today! Won't you sit down, Madam?" Mathilda sat down. . . Mockingly the man said, "Now why have you come? I know why you have really come. You want to preach at me, that's why!"

"No!" Mathilda said emphatically. "I will not talk to you about God now. Some other day, when you really want to know about him, I will be most happy to do so, but certainly not now." The inmate was surprised by Mathilda's poise and peacefulness as she sat there. He thought, "Was she not really afraid of him?" He then moved and sat down beside her on the bench, blocking the way to the cell door.

Mathilda did not move or flinch. She was filled with empathy for this hulk of a man caged in this narrow cell. The dilemma now moved to this caged man. He had sworn to himself to kill the next person to enter his cell. Could he kill a woman? He had never dreamed that a woman would come to visit him. Frustration welled up inside him. He blurted out, "I vowed I would murder the next person who would enter my cell. Get out of here fast, before I do it!"

Mathilda looked at him with her dark eyes. "But if I go, then you will murder the next person who comes?"

(He) "Yes, my mind is made up!"

"Then I will stay," Mathilda said. She folded her hands and waited.

There was silence, then the occasional rattle of the man's chains. Then the groans of a man in torment. Finally he shrieked. The huge man threw himself on the ground in front of Mathilda and wept like a child.

Mathilda continued to visit this man. The time eventually came when he did want to know more about this God that Mathilda knew.¹

As Mathilda visited prisoners, she entered their dark world of hidden and public deeds. She entered the presence of their torment. She did so anchored in the compelling words of the Gospel text for today. John 3:16-17 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 "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.

She was able to see the person for whom her Lord and Savior died. Because she was grounded in God's light in her life she was able to carry that light into a dark, dank and dangerous place. Yet she did so without fear. It was her faith and the conviction that God was calling her to do this, that undergirded her in this work.

The light has come into this world in Jesus Christ. John 8:12b Jesus proclaimed "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

A person far different than this Finnish prisoner came to Jesus in the darkness of night time. His name was Nicodemus. He was of high position, one of seventy rulers for the Jewish people and the temple in Jerusalem. Curious, but more than curious, he sought answers, how can this teacher produce such signs of God's reign if he is not of God? "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," Nicodemus said.

Jesus' response confounds Nicodemus further, similar to Mathilda confounding the prisoner by not fleeing. 3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." How can this be, Nicodemus asked. Light and salvation was standing before Nicodemus. Jesus makes clear here that he must be lifted up on the cross to fulfill God's purpose. That his actual death is for the salvation of the world, and Nicodemus' very own salvation. Whoever sees and believes the light has eternal life.

John 3: 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 "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.

¹ Lehn, Cornelia. Peace Be With You. Newton,KS:Faith and Life Press. 1980. Pp. 73-75

¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

John 3:1-21

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? ¹¹ "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. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ "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.

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