

Second Sunday of Lent—Year A
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Christians, probably forever, have argued about the best way to be faithful to God. The arguments typically fall into one of two big categories: a life of action or a life of contemplation. Most people nowadays would agree that the church needs both the fruits of action as well as the benefits of contemplation, though, it's safe to say that the individual Christian tends to favor one or another. Maybe you're more the kind to sit quietly by candlelight, prayer book open, listening for the still, small voice of God. Or maybe you're more the type to march in the streets trying to make the world look something more like the kingdom of God that Jesus teaches about. Different people live out their faith in different ways, and I believe the church benefits from that. After all, it's hard to know what action to take out in the world if you have not been in scripture and prayer first.

To no one's surprise, I think I'd make a lousy contemplative. I'd be a terrible monk. I talk too much and I bore easily.

Knowing this, imagine my surprise when I had what I believe was a legitimate, contemplative religious experience earlier this week. I was here one night at the church getting communion from the tabernacle to bring to someone in the hospital. It was pretty dark in here, so I turned on one light. Even though it's a bit of an old fashioned custom, I tend to bow when I pass by an altar, and so, all by myself in the dark, I stopped, closed my eyes and bowed on my way out of the sanctuary. I was standing there, in the dark, a little amused at the series of events in life that had brought me to the exact moment of bowing to a piece of furniture late at night, alone, in a church. Chuckling at myself, I looked up and saw the light shining on the cross, and I got the strongest sense that God was just as amused as I was. It felt like God was somehow right there with me in the darkness, feeling what I was feeling, chuckling just as I was chuckling. Maybe even winking at me a little.

I know that the dark is supposed to be scary or spooky, but I found that late-night time with God to be absolutely refreshing. I wonder how Nicodemus felt, late at night, in the dark with God.

Imagine Nicodemus, the Pharisee and learned rabbi, coming to Jesus at night. Candles lit, in some ways outside of normal space and time. In that holy darkness, Nicodemus was able to ask all his questions, unburden himself of all his doubts, really be seen for who he was by Jesus.

Nicodemus says some of the things we might be too scared to say. He talks about his doubts. He talks about his fears. He even expresses some skepticism about the place of Jesus in the divine story. Sound familiar? Surely we have all come to God in the darkness with these same doubts, these same fears.

And Jesus reminds Nicodemus the Son of Man was sent to this broken world to heal what's sick and mend what's broken. Jesus reminds Nicodemus, and reminds us, that we are born again into

a special life with God. Christians have understood this for centuries to be about Baptism into the family of Christ—a new way of being born, a new kind of life to live.

The Gospel passage doesn't really say what happened to Nicodemus after his encounter in the dark with Jesus. Was he the same? Was he transformed? I'm not sure. But I do know what it's like to encounter God in the dark—the darkened sanctuary, the starry sky, the bedroom staring at the ceiling at four am. Maybe you have met God there too.

When God meets us in these special places, we can't help but be different. We can't but help be born again. We get a small glimpse of what the world ought to be. And we get a small glimpse of Divine love. Deep. Still. Present.

If you are doing some seeking right now, good for you. If this Lenten season is finding you looking really hard for Jesus and asking some hard questions, good for you. You in good company. Even the most learned leaders in the kingdom of Israel found Jesus hard to understand.

But be fairly warned: if you ask the hard questions of God, you may get answers that will transform your life. You might hear about the saving work of Jesus in the world. You might hear about God's love and the ache God feels when the world is not as it should be. You might even feel compelled to help Jesus in His work of healing the world. It's a little dangerous to meet Jesus in the dark, because you definitely won't be the same afterward. Who know? Jesus might just remind you that you have been born again into a faithful, just, powerful Christian family.

So, whether we find ourselves alone in prayer each morning or out in the hustle and bustle of the world living your faith in the streets, we all have a bit of Nicodemus in us. We all have some of that questioning of God, that longing for God to live in us. And that is a good and holy fact. If you are willing to take the risk to meet God in the dark, God will meet you—and love you—right back.