

Scripture: John 3:1-7, 17-21; John 19:39-40

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.”’

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. **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 judgement, 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.’

39 Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. **40** They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.

Sermon: The Unsure One: Courageous or Sissy

We’ve heard the crafted first-person account of Nicodemus. We’ve heard the biblical account of most of his interactions with Jesus. But why does the person of Nicodemus matter?

The person of Nicodemus is a complex one. There have been differing opinions about Nicodemus’ intentions, reactions, and, frankly, his change

because of Jesus. Some view Nicodemus as a courageous convert, while others see him as a hesitant follower. So, let's look at what these views are so that we can understand how we fit or don't fit within the character of Nicodemus.

Nicodemus as courageous convert. The name Nicodemus, in and of itself, means "conqueror of the people" in Greek. That gives us a good beginning standing for this view, right? In this positive light, Nicodemus did not visit Jesus at night in order to hide, but rather is viewed as visiting Jesus because he had stuck with the customs that the study of the law (God's law) was supposed to be done at night. He also could have gone at night to Jesus in order to have uninterrupted time with Jesus, or because that was the only time he had free from his responsibilities as part of the legislative body of Jewish people. When talking with Jesus, he began by saying "we". "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." In this case, researchers believe that he was talking as a leader of his community.

To add to this courageousness of seeing Jesus, who was deemed a dangerous zealot, in John 7, starting at verse 50, Nicodemus was seen defending Jesus in front of the Sanhedrin. The scripture reads, "Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, 'Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?' They replied, 'Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search, and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.'" It looks like from this view, Nicodemus had tremendous guts, transforming from a skeptic to a Jesus believer. One could even argue that he was willing to lose his professional and political standing in order to follow Jesus.

Then, if we were to look at the second scripture that we read this morning, when Jesus had died, and needed to be buried in a hurry, as to maintain the Jewish custom of doing nothing on the Sabbath, Nicodemus brought 100lbs of

costly spices to bury Jesus. It would have looked like from an outsider's perspective that they were burying deceased royalty. This courageously stood for Nicodemus's belief in Jesus's eternal royalty. Then, researchers have noted for our remembrance that Nicodemus did step forward to help bury Jesus's body when many had deserted Jesus out of fear for their own lives.

Nicodemus, the Courageous Convert!

Or maybe, Nicodemus, the hesitant follower. The same three bible passages that drew some to believe Nicodemus was a courageous believer could be understood to showcase him as a sissy. While the second school of thought recognized that Nicodemus was drawn to Jesus and all that Jesus had to teach, they understood Nicodemus as one who could not unconditionally follow Jesus. These researchers, much like our first-person narrative, found Nicodemus's visit to Jesus at night to be one of fear of maintaining his social and political standing, as well as only addressing Jesus as "teacher" rather than "Messiah". In their first encounter, when talking to Jesus, Nicodemus's "we" statement is seen as hiding behind his own standing rather than becoming personally vulnerable. These same researchers saw, instead of bravery through coming to Jesus, a dialogue that presented as proud and resistant rather than humble and questioning.

In what appeared as a defense of Jesus with his Sanhedrin brothers, Nicodemus was still a coward because instead of coming in direct defense of Jesus, he asks a rhetorical question and is never heard from again, while Jesus continued teaching.

Nicodemus is lastly criticized for not bringing comfort to Joseph of Arimathea during the burial of Jesus. Rather than helping Joseph and others feel safe during the burial, we read that it was done in secret, at night, "for fear of the Jews." AND Nicodemus is only mentioned at the burial in the Gospel of John rather than all four gospels.

So, after all the evidence, is Nicodemus a courageous convert or a hesitant follower?

Well, friends, we still aren't done gathering the significance of these encounters. Jesus does play a role here in our perception of Nicodemus. As the two engaged in conversation, biblical commentators have noted Jesus' reaction to Nicodemus. While Nicodemus inquired, Jesus did not just answer his questions. Jesus warned him against trying to come to him with only a logical, law-filled mind. Rather, Jesus invited Nicodemus to approach the idea of being born "from above" or "again" as a mystery of God's power beyond human knowledge and control. At the end of the conversation, Nicodemus had not come any closer to understanding Jesus than when he had approached him. If we were to look at Jesus' conversation as a whole in chapter 3, we would see that Jesus shifts from question/answer to monologue, which suggests Jesus's desire to silence the resistance he received from Nicodemus.

We could continue to work through different thoughts throughout the interactions we see through Nicodemus, but that would take us another hour. We could also dialogue for hours about whether Nicodemus actually was a courageous convert or a hesitant follower. Instead, I want us to approach this in a different way.

What if there were aspects of Nicodemus that meant he was both? What if he were both courageous and hesitant? What if we can see ourselves just like him?

In this time and in this space, do we find ourselves courageous and hesitant in our faith? Because friends, being a follower of Jesus is hard!

We see in the middle section of our scripture today a monologue by Jesus about something called “realized eschatology.” Realized Eschatology is all about God’s judgment of the world, but not in a futuristic way. Rather, this judgment has been happening since the time of Jesus. We are reminded in the scripture that Jesus was not the initiation of God’s judgmental wrath on humanity, but rather to bring us back into a relationship. Now, while Jesus’s ministry was occurring and every moment after, the world is confronted with whether or not to believe in all that God is doing through Jesus. This judgment was not concluded in advance, but is in the here and now. Where is our faith and belief lived in our lives?

I want us to take a few moments today before moving on with our worship to really think about these aspects of faith. As you entered today, you received a half sheet of colorful paper. I invite you now to take that out, along with the pen you received with your bulletin. Shirley is going to play a few stanzas of a hymn while we write, and then I invite us to take these home, as we will be adding to them each week with different perspectives of the cross. Let us begin.

Let us pray: Faithful God, you have presented us with a love unlike any other. As we contemplated our lived-out faith today, we acknowledge that there is always room for us to grow. Fill us. Empower us. Move us to bridge the gap between our faith and our impact on the world. In your name, we pray. Amen.