

Yr. A, Lent 2
March 8, 2020
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1521 Words

Lessons:

Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalms 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17

He arrived by night, all alone.

Why was Nicodemus, a well-educated man, interested in meeting Jesus, a young Galilean with no academic pedigree? What does this leader from Jerusalem expect to learn from an outside agitator who just flipped the tables and scattered the animals and coins of the 'sacrifice economy' that everybody took for granted? How does an authority in the religious establishment even deign to ask for a meeting with someone who described the Temple's destruction and his own personal ability to replace it?

We should be surprised this meeting ever happened. How many loyalists do you know who have switched teams? How many experts do you know who have admitted a lack of understanding? How many leaders do you know who have acted with humility in the face of a threat to their status? (I thought so.)

Lee Thomas describes a meeting he once had in a grocery store. "I was standing in line at the checkout," he says, "and I can just feel this guy staring at me." That is not a huge problem for most of us. Lee says, "You can just give someone like that a mean face, and they will usually stop staring, but the thing is...I'm not a mean dude."

Then Lee explains to us the reason for the staring. He has vitiligo, a medical condition that affects about 2% of the population. It's not contagious or life threatening, it is simply a pigmentation disorder that affects one's appearance.

From the moment of Nicodemus' appearance, we hear of his peculiar interest in Jesus. "Rabbi, *we know* you are a teacher who has come from God..."

So, who is the 'we' that Nicodemus is talking about? How many other Pharisees and leaders does he represent? Is it one or two friends who have seen the miraculous signs, and are secretly curious? Or is it a large number of council members who witnessed the scandal in the Temple Courtyard, and dispatched Nicodemus to get to the bottom of it all? All we know is that Jesus stood out in the crowd, and people wanted to find out more about him.

Just past the checkout, near the door of the grocery store, Lee says, "Hey buddy! What's up?" And then describes how the startled man awkwardly grapples with the fact that he is a grown man staring at another grown man in a grocery store. Lee's kindness opens the door to a conversation. He gives the guy a safe opportunity to ask him questions. After about five minutes they say good bye to one another and the other guy says, "You know, if you didn't have vitiligo, you'd look just like that guy on T.V."

Have you noticed how Jesus gave Nicodemus a safe opportunity to ask his ignorant questions? "How can anyone be born after growing old?" Nicodemus asks. "(How) can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

One of the simple gifts we can share with others is a willingness to accept their sincere—if awkward—questions. I can think of many times I have been that awkwardly inquiring person, and so I try to be patient and kind with other peoples' questions.

Next, Lee tells us that he *is that guy on T.V.* He is an anchor and an entertainment reporter on a morning show in Detroit, and like all people who work on T.V. he wears a lot of makeup. It's normal and expected. Lee plainly admits, "I have a cosmetic job in a superficial industry interviewing the most beautiful people in the world." He wears the makeup because he doesn't want to lose his job. The way Lee describes it is really painful to hear, because I think his statement applies to so many of us in different respects. This is what he said: "I just cover it up, and keep on moving...I just cover it up, and keep on moving."

Is that the story of Nicodemus? Was he just trying to "cover it up and keep on moving" in a leadership position that was becoming harder and harder to hold with integrity? Was Nicodemus having so much trouble imagining a new birth, a new beginning, because he was so far down the road of a different life?

Is that why he got so literal with his interpretation of Jesus' promise? Maybe it was just too hard for him to imagine a do-over in his faith life...a fresh start with a more generous, open theology of God's love.

I want you to know...that I know...that it is just as hard for us. So many times...we just "cover it up and keep on moving."

One day a woman called Lee at the T.V. station and asked if he would please talk to her 14-year-old son, who has vitiligo. "Of course," he said. Now, this kid makes straight A's and he takes karate lessons.

The boy and the TV personality enjoy a nice telephone conversation, and then the boy says, "Mr. Thomas, I have a question to ask—would you show your face on T.V. without makeup?"

Mmmmm.

Lee admits that his boss has been asking him about this for years, but he kept putting it off. "Let me think about it," he would say...with no real intention of thinking about it. Sound familiar?

But the question seemed different now, coming from the boy. Here's why. The boy says to Lee, "If you show people what *you* look like, maybe...they will treat *me* differently."

"So I said, 'Sure, kid. I will do that for you.'"

And the boy replied, "Good, because there is an 8-year-old in my neighborhood who wears a ski mask every time he goes out to play." Lee realized that the 14-year-old was really asking a favor for the 8-year-old, and here he was—a grown man hiding behind makeup.

I think this is the story of Nicodemus. I think he came out in the night to ask a favor for other people who could not or *would not* come out to ask for themselves. And this is what Nicodemus learned:

"God so loved *the world* that he gave his only Son..." Jesus did *not* say, "God so loved the beautiful people...or the law-abiding people...or even the chosen people." What *he said was* "God so loved the world.

And, if you can just *believe in*...trust...maybe even love Someone who is so ridiculously eager to *love everyone in the world*, then...you may *have* eternal life."

This is the kind of good news that should give us the courage to stop "covering it up (whatever 'it' is) and moving on." This is the kind of good news that invites *us*—along with Nicodemus—to give thanks that we are loved as we are...with our *true colors*.

Lee describes how vulnerable he felt walking down the hallway to the T.V. studio on that fateful morning. Some of his co-workers had never seen him without makeup. Some of them had trouble even looking him in the eye that morning. He took his seat on the set anyway, and said, “Good morning, Detroit!”

The response was immediate and overwhelmingly positive. Lee’s story elicited the biggest email and snail mail response of the year. People desperately want to hear and see something true...something authentic and good and beautiful.

Well, guess what? We also get to say *and show* something true...and good...and beautiful. We get to say, “God so loves the world...and that means God so loves you.” You don’t have to “cover up and keep moving” on a path that is *not* life-giving. You don’t have to be afraid of being accepted, because you already are.

Every day of our lives, we get to say, “I want to believe in this promise. I want to take a chance—even a *scary chance*—that God’s loving promise is true...real...and available, even for me.”

Lee re-directed all that positive attention by forming a vitiligo support group in Detroit. Other people started forming vitiligo support groups around the nation, and then around the world. Do you see how truth and love and beauty can spread with a little courage?

Well, we know this very thing happened for Nicodemus because he actually re-appears in the Gospel according to St. John. He reappears in chapter 7 when he has the courage to stand up for Jesus when he is on trial. Nicodemus asks the other leaders, “Is it legal to judge someone without first hearing from them?”

Do you know what they did? They made fun of Nicodemus, as shallow people tend to do. Predictably, those leaders just “covered it up, and kept on moving” to convict Jesus.

And so, just as Jesus had predicted that first night when he met Nicodemus, “the Son of Man *was* lifted up (on a cross) so that whoever believes in him—in his truthful, good, and compassionate way of revealing the boundless love of God—they may have eternal life.

Dear people, God loves you...with your true colors. So, first, be thankful...and then—like Nicodemus—be courageous with whatever new beginnings...new opportunities...and new life this presents for you.

Amen.