**SERMON John 3:1-17**

Maybe you're someone who falls asleep as soon as your head hits the pillow, and you don't budge until your alarm goes off in the morning. I'm happy for you, I really am. But most of us only Daydream about such a restful and fit free nights slumber. Hundreds of studies in the US have revealed that the vast majority of Americans are chronically under rested. Millions of people suffer from insomnia, and that was before the pandemic. And unfortunately, coronavirus creates a host of new challenges period from adjusting to new daily schedules or lack of a schedule, a day without normal anchors like dropping the kids off at school, arriving at the office, reoccurring social events or coming to church weekly. Our circadian rhythm has been knocked off kilter and of course worries abound. Bringing anxiety that disrupts sleep, as our racing mind keeps our body tossing and turning.

I wonder how long Nicodemus was awake before he came to see Jesus that night? I wonder how many nights he had tossed and turned? Might he have been worried or anxious or fearful? What were the thoughts that kept him from staying in his bed that night? How long had Jesus been on his mind? What emotions were rising to the surface, intruding upon his consciousness? how long did it take for him to finally decide to just get up and go to Jesus? When did he resolve himself to meet Jesus face-to-face? what convinced him that if he was ever to have a good night's sleep again that he needed to act now? I wonder when he knocked on Jesus’ door had he already rehearsed what he was going to say? Did the words come out how he even wanted?

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God” (v2) He blurts out. ‘Teacher, we know who you are. Me and the other Pharisees and teachers of the law we figured it out... it was obvious really when we thought about it... “for no one could do the things you do without God's presence”.’

This passage – the one with John 3:16, that many of us memorized in the King James or still see on interstate billboards – is so familiar to most of us that we may be guilty of overlooking even forgetting why Nicodemus had come to Jesus in the 1st place. Nicodemus did not come to ask a question or to be healed or to see a miracle or to have his sins forgiven or to hear a parable or to have Jesus pray for him or teach him anything. Nicodemus did come because he wanted to tell Jesus that he had figured out who he was. Jesus was a teacher, that bit was obvious. So was Nicodemus ... But unlike Nicodemus, and any of the other teachers he knew, Jesus was obviously different. Jesus was obviously special. Jesus was from “God” and had “God's presence.” Nicodemus had honed into what he thought was unique with this particular rabbi.

Now, we may speculate about what else Nicodemus wanted to know or to ask of Jesus ...Did he want to know how to teach like Jesus taught, or heal like Jesus healed, or cast out demons like Jesus, or how to be courageous, loving and compassionate like Jesus? We simply don't know. However, in the first few verses of John chapter 3 we witness a back and forth between these two men, two teachers that seems totally disconnected with the whole reason that got Nicodemus out of bed in the first place. So, what might be happening here? What might Jesus be doing, what else is he teaching Nicodemus? And us?

Returning back to verse 3, after Nicodemus declares that he knows who Jesus is, he sees what makes him different, special, capable of signs and miracles. Jesus replies, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above” (v3). Jesus essentially says you may see who I am... but you don't see the bigger picture. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above” (v3). You may see me, but I am only a part of what God is up to in this world. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above” (v3). Nicodemus, you've worked out one part of the puzzle, but your perspective remains limited, your eyesight still needs correction, your vision is only partial, your insight is still narrow. Nicodemus, I'm glad you (and the others) have finally recognized the God is the one who resides in me, who empowers me and is providing wisdom and courage ... and that's big ... but there's more yet to see. And it doesn't require intellect or expertise. “You need to be born from above” (v3). You need to elevate your perspective. You need to adjust your vision. You need to broaden your sights, and you need to believe what you.”

Folks, I don't know about you, but I feel for Nicodemus in this moment. He's been tossing and turning in his bed for who knows how many nights, and he finally plucks up the courage to go and tell Jesus that he is worked something out. He is figured out Jesus’ identity, and he knows it's special. And yet when he arrives at Jesus house, Jesus tells him good effort, but you haven't quite got it yet. I feel for Nicodemus, I feel his heart sink, I feel the wind being knocked out of him. That horrible feeling of being deflated, thinking you've grasped something only did find out you haven't. How often have you being in such a situation? How often have you thought that you have got the hang of something, gained in confidence and knowledge even expertise, whether it's your job, your studies, your sport, your musical instrument, your finances, parenting, your grasp off scripture, your knowledge of current events, environment issues or racial justice. Only to be in conversation with someone to find out there's so much more to know.

I feel for Nicodemus, when – after he’s questioning all the conclusions he had reached during his sleepless night – he then gets tripped up Jesus’ wordplay, confusing the literal for the figurative. “You need to be born from above” (v3) Jesus says. And Jesus continues, undistracted by Nicodemus is need for clarity. “You see Nicodemus, ‘being born from above’ is like ‘being born of water and of spirit,’ it's not like being born ‘of the flesh’ (v5-7). When you're born of the flesh you are still subject to limitations, to the constraints of human preoccupation with status and prestige, and obsessions with roles and obligations to human institutions. Things that though not bad in-and-off themselves, work to limit your vision for what is actually possible – with God. Oh Nicodemus, when you are ‘born from above,’ when you are ‘born of the spirit,’ and you can see not just WHO I am, but WHY I am. Why God sent me. What God is doing. And when you can see that – God’s presence, the essence and authority that you recognize in me, will also be available to you. That is the Kingdom of God, and you'll be free of life-limiting ideas and values, and the life-limiting endless pursuit of security, belonging and worth. You will be like the wind that blows where it chooses, Nicodemus.”

Jesus longs for Nicodemus to see the bigger picture, to see that his presence and work down her on earth is part of God’s ongoing relationship with a humanity that seems to perpetually miss the point. We’re jumping ahead a little bit, but this is the context in which we find our ‘much-loved’ verse, John 3:16! “For God so loved the world the God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him, may not perish but may have eternal life” (v16). Jesus longs for Nicodemus to understand that – yes, the presence of Creator God is with him/Jesus – but this Creator God loves the world and desires everyone to taste full and eternal life. Jesus longs for Nicodemus to not just see who he is, but why God has sent him in the first place, and what God is doing that will extended far beyond the life of Jesus.

When Nicodemus was tossing and turning, unable to fall asleep because he had deduced from Jesus actions that there had to be something else to who this Rabbi was, there had to be. And when he finally made his mind up to find Jesus and tell him, “Rabbi, I know who you are, you are from God.” Did he even consider the possibility that there might be more? Did he even imagine that there might be something more, something LOVING, something PERSONAL, something that would touch more than his mind, but his heart and soul too. So more so that the transformation available to him would be like “being born again.”

You see again and again when our vision for what is possible is constricted by our upbringing, our abilities, our finances, our religious or political institutions our lives become beholden and to those earthly things and again and again the God who made us, and the God who became flesh, reveals to us the reality of divine love and its power to liberate us from all that seeks to limit our lives on earth. Jesus the Christ comes sharing our humanity yet lives as free is the wind. This God meets us, calls us to listen, shows us a more life-giving way, and loves us. God has initiated a loving relationship with a flawed and anxious humanity. God loves us, even when we are at our most unlovable. God doesn't wait until we figured stuff out or understand what divine work is being done in plain sight all around us. Instead, God loves first period before we or Nicodemus was born. Before the worries and restrictions of a global pandemic. Before we've done anything right, anything of merit, God ongoing outpouring of grace, is manifested in the divine act of love. This is the part that Nicodemus misses? And often it’s the part we miss as well? Why is it so hard for us to accept this is the bigger picture?

No, I don't know what really kept Nicodemus up at night. I wonder whether he felt stressed and under pressure with all the demands of being an expert in the law. I wonder if he worried whether he was good enough, clever enough to earn his position amongst the Pharisees. I wonder if he questioned his own sense of authority and worried whether everything, he had invested his life in was really all there was. We will never know what was really going through his head that night when he visited Jesus. but I like to think that maybe Jesus did.

Perhaps Jesus was answering a question that even Nicodemus couldn't even put words to. “Nicodemus you see me... But there's more. God is already acted, and God is not done yet. You feel limited, constricted and stressed out. But God is in a process of liberating you from everything that seeks to hold you down and limit your life and Nicodemus, God is doing this because God loves you.” Amen.