

## The Extra Verse

What keeps you up at night on those nights when you can't sleep, or when you wake up in the middle of the night and your mind starts to run? First there are the immediate concerns – things you should have done that you didn't do, the to-do list for tomorrow; then there are the people and things you are worried about – the family member with a health issue, the friend who needs a job, the kid who's having a hard time at school; then, as you have set all those immediate issues to rest, come the big questions: what is the purpose of my life; how is God working in this mess of a world; how can we create world peace. You turn those questions over and over in your mind. Sometimes you are finally able to just put them aside or come to a place of peace and roll over and go back to sleep. But sometimes they drive you from your bed to read or to write or to pray.

Many commentators have come up with reasons why Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Some have suggested it was because he was afraid that someone might see him. Others of a more literary bent have suggested that it has to do with the theme of revealing, glorious light and fear-filled, death-dealing darkness that runs through John's gospel. Those may both be true, but I'd like to add my own theory – that Nicodemus was having one of those nights. The big question that was keeping him awake was who was this Jesus and why could he do amazing signs. Was he really the Messiah that he, as a faithful Pharisee, had been waiting for? Nicodemus was lucky. He had a way to answer the question, so he rolled out of bed, put on his clothes and went to the place where Jesus was staying to ask him himself.

That's the thing about Jesus. God as a whole is too big for us to get our minds around. In the Old Testament, people who find themselves face to face with God find it more than they can bear. They hide their eyes and tremble in holy fear and awe. But Jesus was God incarnate, God in a human form that you could see and touch and talk to. Nicodemus knew he could go to Jesus.

Nicodemus is the first in an unlikely parade of people in John's gospel to have this kind of encounter with Jesus. He's followed by the woman at the well and the people who follow Jesus around the lake after the feeding of the 5000, Martha by the tomb of her brother Lazarus and the disciples themselves on Jesus' last night with them. The gospel begins with the great revelation of the prologue: In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the Word was God....and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth...and we have seen his glory. The whole gospel is a gradual revealing of that glory from Nicodemus' visit in the darkness of the night to the bright dawn of a new day as the women arrive at an empty tomb.

I'm not sure how much satisfaction Nicodemus got from that late night visit. Through the whole conversation, he and Jesus seem to be talking at cross purposes. Nicodemus is focused on the literal, what can be proven, seen, known for sure. Jesus is operating on a whole different level. Jesus talks about being reborn "another" which means again or from above, the gift of a new, spiritual life which God alone can give. Nicodemus thinks he means you have to become a baby again and wonders how he could fit back in his mother's womb. Jesus talks about the wind of the Spirit and Nicodemus looks around to see where the breeze is coming from.

Yet in the middle of this muddle of misunderstanding, there is a moment of revelation. It's one of the first verses that we teach to our children. It's the verse we see displayed on a banner in the end zone at football games. It's the verse that goes right to the heart of what God was doing through Jesus. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

So often that verse and the one that goes before it about being born again have been understood in American Christianity in one way – that in order to be Christian one had to have a certain "born again" experience, and that it

was to save you, as an individual, that Jesus came. It has been used to open the way of grace to some people, but it has also been used to shut off the flow of grace to others.

But that's not what Jesus says. He says it was to save the world that he came – the world that in every other place in John's gospel represents everything that stands against Jesus, everyone who pushes back against God's light, everyone who rejects God's love. After that comes the extra verse, the one that rarely is added on – that God came into the world not to condemn the world but to save it.

In this day and age when “whoever isn't for me is against me” is the order of the day, it's hard to take in the radical nature of what God is doing through Jesus. We try to enlist God on our side, no matter what side we're on. We demonize and dehumanize those who oppose us, those who disagree with us. But that's not how God works. Martin Niemoller, a Lutheran pastor who spoke out against the perversion of the church in Nazi Germany said, “It took me a long time to understand that God is not the enemy of my enemies. God is not even the enemy of God's enemies.”

Jesus didn't come to judge. He didn't come to condemn. He came to save the world, even those who would crucify him. He came to save the world because he loves it. Tom Long says, “The point is clear: improbably, shockingly, God loves the actual world, the God-despising world. God loves the world with such ferocity that God draws near to save, even to dwell among us in the flesh. “When God loves,” says Meier, “things happen: great things, terrible things, incarnation and the cross.

God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son not only for our sake, but so the whole world would be saved. That's what love looks like. Jesus on the cross, Jesus risen from the grave. That amazing love requires us also, as those who believe in Jesus, to take on a whole new life, a life lived in response to God's love and demonstrating that love for others. John Buchanan,

who was the pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, tells of a time when he was baptizing a two-year old. He read the standard words: "you are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever." At those words, the child responded quite clearly. "Uh-oh."

Uh-oh indeed. Because our baptism commits us to the way of life Jesus lived, the world loving, enemy-saving love. Uh-oh. That's not easy. If that's the requirement, left on my own I could be in trouble. That takes the turn-around, born-again life that only the Spirit can give. Loving and living like that every day, with that kind of attitude toward God and toward the world, that's what it means to be born again.

Jesus laid a lot on Nicodemus that night he came with his questions. It took time to process and to understand. That encounter in the dark wasn't the end of his questions. It might have been the beginning, the beginning of the labor pains, the beginning of Nicodemus' birth from above. Nicodemus left shaking his head with a lot to think about – a God who loved the world – the unclean, impure world – enough to send his son. We know that for Nicodemus this wasn't the end of the story. He shows up two more times in John's gospel, once, in chapter 7, where he speaks up for Jesus among the Sanhedrin, asking that Jesus be given a fair hearing before he is judged. And at last, he is found among the faithful, as he helps Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus down from the cross to bury him. I wonder if he heard these words as he did so: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son..."