

GENESIS 12:1-5 (p. 9)

MARCH 12, 2017

JOHN 3:1-18 (p. 862)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord, we know that you welcome little children with open arms. In fact you have said in Scripture that whoever becomes as humble as a child will be considered great in your Kingdom. So today Lord we ask you to make us humble. Enable us to trust. Cause us to believe with child-like faith. And allow us, with open arms, to learn the things that you have to teach. In Jesus' name we ask this, Amen.

"IN THE DARK"

In the beginning, darkness covered the entire surface of the deep! That's where we start. That's where we are. Then God pushes the darkness back with His Word! God spoke, and light penetrated the darkness! I find that profound! Instructive even! God's Word is the light by which we see! And it's good too, it says in Genesis!

In the book of Job we learn that God has placed a boundary between darkness and light. Not only differentiated between the two, but also setting them apart! In the Psalms and Proverbs we find a number of instances where light is associated with wisdom and truth, and darkness equated with ignorance and evil! The Prophet Isaiah proclaims that the people living in darkness have seen a great Light! And now, in the Gospel of John, we hear the Apostle declare that that Light is none other than Jesus Christ—the Light of the World—the darkness-piercing Word of God! ...Again, I think that's profound, don't you! The darkness, however, it says, refuses to understand!

Maybe it's Lent! Maybe it's Springtime! Maybe it's simply the time change! But for some reason Darkness and Light have really been on my mind! Maybe it's the world that we live in, or how people perceive the world that we live in! There really is a lot going on you know!

In any case it's late, at night, and Nicodemus, an apparent seeker of truth, comes to Jesus in darkness! Perhaps he pounds on the door where Jesus is staying, interrupting dinner? Or maybe he wakes Jesus from a sound sleep? I've always pictured them out on an isolated stretch of road, somewhere on the winding streets of Jerusalem. They are in the Capital though, that much we are told, in the City of David, not far from God's Holy Temple! So at night, a member of the Jewish Ruling Council walks up to Jesus surrounded by Darkness and says "Rabbi, I think you are pretty special! You are amazing, really, awesome! Some of us acknowledge even that you come from Almighty God. Otherwise you couldn't possibly do the miracles that you do! Many of us are really impressed!"

Notice that Nicodemus doesn't actually ask a question at this point. He is still in the dark, isn't he, yet he doesn't really query Jesus. Or maybe he does! I mean the question, "How the heck is all this possible?" is certainly implied here, isn't it! Enlighten me Jesus! Enlighten all of us! There is obviously something that we're missing! And Jesus responds with, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again, born from above".

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a religious teacher. He is an expert in the faith! He knows the Law inside and out! He can quote all of the Prophets! And yet he is coming to Jesus looking for enlightenment!

The Miracles have obviously impressed him! My goodness, changing water into wine at the wedding! Or maybe it was Jesus' sense of pious respect for the Holiness of God? I mean, flipping the tables of the money changers over in the Temple Courts! Or maybe it's all the people talking about witnessing all the miraculous signs, and being convinced of Jesus' authority!

Maybe Nicodemus is thinking about the Temple being destroyed like Jesus said, and Him raising it again in just three days? Maybe it's all of the things that have happened during the Passover Feast, or all of the people who now obviously believe? Something, though, has definitely gotten his attention! ...So he comes to Jesus in the dark!

Again, this is a member of the Great Sanhedrin, the Jewish Ruling Council! He is a well-connected politician, a zealous enforcer of proper Jewish Law! And according to the First Century Historian Josephus, Pharisees like Nicodemus were usually rich, often mid-level government officials, bureaucrats charged with keeping public order! They were judges, and educators, and teachers of the Law and such. So this late night conversation is between two very learned men, two trained theologians! So I think it is safe to assume then, that it lasted for a very long time!

It's late, and Nicodemus has just put in a long day as the First Century equivalent of say, a Department Head at the local University. He is on the Board maybe, or possibly even the Chair of the College of Religion and Philosophy! He is a well-educated, well-respected, completely competent man, with an entire alphabet of initials behind his name! I like to think of him as the Right Reverend, Nicodemus the Wise, Doctor of Ministry, Professor, M.Div., PhD, Esquire! Imagine a Supreme Court Justice if you will, and a Senator, and an Adjunct Professor, as well as a Member of the Clergy, all rolled up into one! ... Yet he comes to Jesus in the dark!

There is a difference, isn't there, between knowledge and wisdom. A big difference! There is a clear distinction that we should probably keep in mind. Knowledge is what tells you that a Tomato is a fruit. Wisdom, however, is the thing that tells you that even though it is, it's not a good idea to put it in your Fruit Salad!

Nicodemus is a Pharisee! He possesses great knowledge! But he has come to Jesus in the dark, searching for wisdom. He is in the dark, looking for illumination! Double Entendre intended! He has somehow gotten a glimpse of the light, and now he wants to see, clearly! So Jesus tells him that if that really is the case, then he needs to be born again! Open your eyes Nick, for the first time! Have faith! Believe!

You know I have often wondered if Nicodemus came searching for answers at night because he afraid of what the other members of the "Good Old Boys Club" would say.

Would they ostracize him, or poke fun maybe? Perhaps he was worried that the President of the College would censor him, or place him on Academic Probation. I mean he is pursuing a non-accredited Avenue of Truth here, right! Maybe Nicodemus is concerned with how his students will see him. I mean, looking for answers with your heart, instead of only with your head!

“Your preaching is powerful and articulate Rabbi. Your theological discourse is well thought out, meticulous in detail, and supported by the most learned minds of our time. The wisdom that you share is immensely helpful for overcoming the hardships of life, Jesus. And the miraculous signs, well, obviously God has gifted you! You are brilliant!”

And that sounds familiar, doesn't it? Lots of people find themselves at that very same place when it comes to Jesus! Nicodemus is impressed, and curious! Something more has gotten his attention, and he wants to check it out! This scholar, “Israel's Teacher”, has somehow been moved from simply admitting that Jesus is a good teacher though. In fact, all the way to the point of acknowledging that Jesus comes from God! He obviously cares about the poor and marginalized of society too! He actually reaches out to them, and heals them in various ways! Jesus not only preaches about justice and compassion, but lives it out on a daily basis! He really cares!

Jesus publically proclaims that the Kingdom of Heaven is being initiated right now! He turns the other cheek, for Heaven's sake! There is definitely something here!

He is the perfect humanitarian maybe, a great example for us to follow, an awesome role model, a guide even! But there is more! I can tell! I can feel it, in my spirit! “Hey Jesus, God is certainly with you! I can sense it!” He is almost there, isn’t he! But because Nicodemus continues to come at this with only his head, at this point anyway, he is still pretty much in the dark! ...No one can see the Kingdom of God, unless he is born again!

By the way, that’s exactly where most of the other world religions are, when it comes to Jesus. So are many historians, and social scientists, and anthropologists and such! No one really doubts that Jesus lived and preached in and around Galilee in the early First Century. And almost everyone readily admits that Jesus was a gifted teacher, a great humanitarian, that He was an extremely compassionate man! The Koran, the Holy Book of Islam, even talks about Jesus as a great Prophet, sent from God! They talk about Him coming back again at the end of time to set things right! Atheists even, at least most of them, readily admit that Jesus was a powerful social reformer, along the lines of Buddha or Gandhi, a good influence for others to emulate!

From a human perspective, and on a physical, or intellectual level, with almost any societal yardstick you might choose to use, this is a man of God! But all that stuff about eternal life, destroying the Temple and then raising it again, being born again, born from above—all that spiritual stuff, the talk about a personal righteous relationship with Almighty God, well!

“I tell you the truth,” says Jesus. “No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again”. You are Scholar Nicodemus. You like facts. But this is not a “head” thing. You need to engage your “heart” as well. You are a follower of Moses. You’ve got the Law and the Prophets down. But this isn’t just a religion thing either! Rituals and routines are simply not enough! Your faith can’t just be an “add on” to what you do with life! You need to make it real, and total, and complete! You need to make it THE top priority! You need to be born again—born from above—born of water and Spirit!

You are thinking physically. I’m talking spiritually. Your concern is with the next forty or fifty years. Mine involves eternity! You want to understand me, know about me. You want to figure me out! But what I want is for you to know me personally, in the very depths of your soul! I want you to believe in me, have confidence in me! I want you to be convinced that God so loved the world that He sent Me here to be lifted up, just as Moses lifted the snake in the wilderness. Because only with that kind of faith can you have eternal life!

You know, I like the fact that Jesus comes to Nicodemus right where he is at. We might need a little explaining. But Nicodemus is a Scholar, a teacher of the faith, so Jesus refers to a historical religious event, one that Nicodemus would have known quite well! When Moses and the Israelites were wandering around in the desert during the Exodus, in the wilderness spiritually, in the dark metaphorically, poisonous snakes were sent to plague them because of their unbelief!

So God, in the book of Numbers, commands Moses to create a snake symbol out of bronze and fasten it to a pole. And then, to lift it up before the people, so that everyone who looked upon it in faith, might trust in the Lord, and so be saved!

Nicodemus would have known the story, quite well actually. And later, when he saw Jesus hanging on the Cross, lifted up where the eyes of faith could see Him, Nicodemus would have gotten the point, immediately! At that moment, the Prophetic Truth of that conversation in the dark, couldn't help but have dawned on him!

Just as an aside, we see Nicodemus two more times in Scripture after his night of questions in the dark? The first time is when Jesus is brought before the Great Sanhedrin for trial, and Nicodemus, sitting on the Council, states that Jesus should not be condemned without first looking into the facts! Let's shine a little light on this, he suggests! Another profound moment, wouldn't you say!

The second time we see Nicodemus in Scripture, is when he comes with a man named Joseph of Arimathea before Pilot, to claim Jesus' body after the Crucifixion. He wants Jesus to be buried in the proper way. Our now, enlightened Pharisee, carries almost seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes, so that he can anoint Jesus' body. A tremendous act of respect! And together, these two men of faith gently wrap the Lord in strips of linen, and lovingly place Him into the tomb. ...Apparently the darkness has lifted! ...In order to see the Kingdom of God, you need to be born again.

I read an article on “doubt” a while back—on twin babies talking in the womb. “Tell me,” said the first “do you believe in life after birth?” ...“Of course,” said the second. “After birth, comes life! Perhaps we are here to prepare for what comes after birth” ...“Forget it,” said the first, “After birth doesn’t exist! Nothing comes after birth! Has anyone ever come back from here and told you about it? Besides, what would it look like?” ...“I don’t know exactly, but I feel that there are lights everywhere! Perhaps we will walk on our own feet, and eat with our own mouth?” ...“That’s utterly stupid! Walking isn’t possible. And how can you eat with that ridiculous mouth? Can’t you see your umbilical cord? Postnatal life isn’t even possible! The cord is just too short!”

“Yeah, but I think there is definitely something after birth, just in a different way than what we call life.” ...“You are being silly. Birth is the end of life and that’s that!” ...“Look, I don’t know exactly what will happen, but Mother will help us.” ...“Mother! Do you believe in the Mother?” ...“Yes!” ...“Don’t be ridiculous! Have you ever seen the Mother? Has anyone ever seen the Mother anywhere?” ...“No, but she is all around us. We live within her. And certainly, it is thanks to her that we exist.” ...“I’ll believe in the Mother when I see her.”

“You can’t see her. I’ll give you that. But if you’re quiet, you can hear her song. And if you are still, you can feel her love. You can feel her caress. You can feel her protective hands, and you can sense that you are loved!”

Maybe it's fear? Maybe it's just the unknown? Maybe it's fear of the unknown? Maybe it's simply being in the dark? What do you think? ...But in order to have eternal life, you need to be born again! "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, it feels so good to spend this time with you in prayer. It feels good to open up our hearts to your Holy Spirit. And it feels good to open up our lives to your transforming presence. In short Father, it feels good to be your people.

We thank you for your love that is showered upon us daily, for your gifts of life, and your gifts of blessings. We thank you for creating us in your image, and for recreating us even now, so that we can be a blessing to others as well. And we thank you especially for calling us together in the name of your Son Jesus Christ.

Lord, you search our hearts, and you know us. You feel our fears with perfect empathy, and are aware of our pains. And you rejoice with us as well, in our moments of glee. You see what we see, Lord, you feel what we feel, and you think what we think. You know what we know Lord, and so, you are already aware of what we have to ask. And yet you desire for us to do so, in faith. So this morning Lord, we ask for your healing hand, and your smiling face, and your bountiful love, extended in each of the lives of.....

Come to them powerfully Lord. Embrace them with the full magnitude of your love. And pour it out through us as well, to them, and to the world. Lord, we pray for wisdom and guidance. We pray for energy and enthusiasm. We pray for peace and security in this troubled world. And Lord, more than anything else, we pray for a deeper and closer relationship with you. Transform us, with your Holy Spirit moving in our lives. Recreate your church, as your Holy Spirit fills us to the brim. And cause us to look on the Cross and believe, as your Holy Spirit nudges our hearts! For we ask this in Jesus' name as we lift up the very prayer that He taught us, saying, Our Father...

Communion:

There is a physical dimension to Communion. We taste the bread and drink the cup. We remember Jesus walking in this world, and look to the time when we will walk with Him in His world. But there is also a spiritual dimension to Communion. We sense in our soul the presence of the Holy Spirit. We are encouraged and empowered to step out in faith. The veil, separating us from the Holy Presence of God is momentarily pulled aside, and we realize that in order to have eternal life, we need to be born again.

Offering:

You've all heard comments like, "you never see a Brinks Truck following a Hearse". And it's true! No one is buried with their checkbook or debit cards. We are but Stewards, temporary managers, of all that has been entrusted into our care. And it is wise, I think, to stop each week at our time of Offering, and consider that fact.