

“Fear Relief”

Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 8:14-10
I John 4:13-19; John 3:1-17

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I can see it. There's this man walking in the shadows of a house. As he gets to the edge of that shadow, he looks up and down the street to see if anybody is out and around. Quickly, he walks across the street and into the shadow of the next house. And so he makes his way along in that way. Finally he comes to a particular house and after glancing around again to see if anybody is watching, he walks up to the door and maybe after glancing, once more around, he knocks on the door. Perhaps what he asks is pretty noncommittal. Simply, "Is this the house where Jesus of Nazarene is staying?" When the answer is yes and he's invited in, I think he probably takes a few more furtive glances around as he slips in the door.

Out of the night, this leader of the Jews, this leader in the Sanhedrin comes to sit and talk with Jesus. We don't know exactly why he came at night, but my best guess is that he was afraid to come in the day. We don't know what he was afraid of. Was he afraid his buddies in the Sanhedrin wouldn't like him anymore if they saw him talking to Jesus? Was he worried Jesus was becoming too much of a movement and he didn't want the Romans to think he was part of that movement. We don't know what he was afraid of, why he came at night.

It's interesting that in John there's this distinct description of darkness and light, that it is Jesus coming to be the light of the world into our darkness and here comes Nicodemus, out of the darkness of night - a place of separation from God. We talked a little bit about sin and evil last week; to be separated from God, to be going in directions that are not in keeping with the way God created things to be, darkness is the place of sin and evil. We recognize that through temptation and through our decisions we can join forces with evil. I used a pretty trivial example of the dessert I don't want to eat, or I don't think I should eat, and yet, we know that our decisions can only sometimes be trivial, and that sometimes as we make those decisions, give in to those temptations, guided into ways that aren't healthful, we become what I think author Scott Peck said, first, we become "people of the lie." We become people who are not living according to God's way. We become those colluding with evil. It is in this context, I think, that Jesus encounters Nicodemus. In a world where there is darkness and sin, in a world we know our own way of doing things that are wrong, Jesus encounters Nicodemus and the fear he brings with him.

I think that fear is generated out of evil and sin generally, either our own - I'm afraid that I'll get caught; afraid that what I did will get known, all kinds of being afraid because of the things I do. But there is also the fear that comes through the sins of others and the interactions and broken relationships and the hard heartedness and even the disastrous and the heinous. It is in this context that Jesus talks to the one who came out of darkness to see him. So what does Jesus say? "You must be born again or born from above." - that phrase can be translated either way and I think it's helpful to translate it both ways, to be born anew or born again or to be born from above. It's helpful for me to think about what it's like to be born. Oh I don't mean the act, I mean right afterwards when you're a baby - to be that newness, that newness of life. We think about a baby, what do they want? They basically want to be fed, to be held, to be dry and how do they try to get those things? They begin to experiment with what they can do. They cry, they coo, beginning to interact with the world around them. Well, we could keep on trying to do that. We could cry when we want to be fed. We could coo when we think things are going well. And

sometimes that works, but generally as adults we know we've moved beyond that. That there's more to being an adult. That is what Jesus is encouraging Nicodemus to realize, that we've moved beyond being self-centered, to begin to see that we're being called to be God-centered, that we're born anew, born from above, allowing the Spirit to work in us, allowing ourselves to be changed, our motivations and reasons for doing what we do be because of God - God's will for us, God's will for the world, God's work among us. I think that's Jesus' invitation to that Nicodemus who comes out of the darkness. It's an invitation to be changed, to be born anew, to be born from above, to let the Spirit begin to work in his life. Of course the recognition is - and he's pretty straightforward - that allowing the Spirit to work does not mean you're in control. You don't always know where it comes from or where it's going, but it is to know that God's in charge, that we are no longer colluding with evil, but trying to find our way along the path that God has set for us.

So as Jesus talks to Nicodemus, he encourages him to trust him, to recognize that it is through him that God is at work and he tells him a little bit about that work. He says "For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son so that who so ever believes or trusts in him shall not perish, but shall have eternal life." Indeed, God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Notice, what is the initial motivation of God? The initial motivation of God is that he loved the world. It's God's love, God chooses to care and value for all that he has created, all of us. So the initial motivation in addressing the darkness is love. We might say the method is love, made real. That's the whole idea of Incarnation - being real among us, walking with us, teaching us, showing us the ways for caring for one another, for caring for God and for what God is all about. And then the spirit moves us to love, to love God with our heart, mind and soul and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

You see, out of the darkness Nicodemus comes and Jesus gives him a new way and shows him what God is doing and how it's grounded in love. In fact, if we go on then, we hear in Romans encouragement not to fall back into the slavery of fear, but to move forward into the love of God. And then on in to first John, again we notice that God loves us and through the spirit and through our trust in God, God works that love out, creating a place where people care for one another, where God's caring for us, valuing us, encouraging us, guiding us, is noticed, and where we're to love one another. It's a love predicated on the fact that he first loved us. It is, I believe, also God's answer to fear. For as we hear in 1 John perfected love drives out fear. I always struggle a bit with that word *perfected* because it's got a lot of baggage with it. But the word that is used in Greek, *telios* means "to come fullness", "to come to completion," "the end is." So when we reach a fullness in love then fear is driven out. I don't think that any of us are probably without fear. I think we're all in the process. In fact, Lent is a time when we get to notice our fear and know that there is one to whom we can go, that we can continue to open our lives to the work of God's Spirit, to let God's love grow in us and among us and have that fear driven out.

Evil and sin are real. We all know and experienced that. But so is the love of God. The love of God that lives among us and through us and in us and with us and there's the real fear-relief. As we allow God's love to encompass us individually as a family of faith, as a community, there's the fear-relief. As we grow in God's love, fear is driven out and we can even live in the face of fear and we grow in God's love. Nicodemus asked a couple simple questions and from it, Jesus offered him the fullness of God' love. We're offered that same love, the fear-relief. Amen.