

Meditation: “In the dark”

One beautiful spring day, a day not unlike today, Jesus went out for a walk around heaven. He decided that since it was such a nice day that he would walk all the way out to the boundary of heaven and walk along the perimeter wall. As he was walking along the perimeter wall, deep in his thoughts, he thought he heard weeping from the other side of the wall. “Friend,” he called, “are you alright?” A voice from the other side of the wall sobbed back, “I am a lonely old carpenter and I have lost my beloved son. I have looked for him everywhere, and now I fear I will never see him again.” Jesus said, “Joseph?” The voice responded, “Pinocchio?”

There are all kinds of interesting things in today’s gospel lesson, like comparing Jesus to a bronze snake. The first thing that jumped out at me as I read the lesson was that Nicodemus went to Jesus after nightfall, in the dark. I wondered if the darkness was literally just a lack of light, or if it was metaphorical. ‘In the dark’ can mean so many things. It can mean literally a time and place where there is an utter and total lack of light, like the time I was trapped in an elevator in Mexico City when the power went out. It was so dark that I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face. Even when we go camping, there is usually some light at night, from the moon and stars, but in that elevator with no power, nothing. When the power came back on, 45 minutes later, it was like leaving the darkness of the womb into the world of light all over again.

‘In the dark’ can also be a reference to ignorance. “He doesn’t have a clue what we mean. He’s totally in the dark.” I think it would be fair to say that Nicodemus was ‘in the dark’ in terms of the discussion he was having with Jesus. Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be an *anōthen*. *Anōthen* is a Greek word that has a double meaning. It can mean ‘born again’, which is how Nicodemus took it. But it can also mean ‘born from above’, which is how I suspect Jesus intended it. If you were paying attention during the reading of the scripture, you would have heard me read a translation that uses ‘born from above’, but most of us might be more familiar with a different translation, the one used in the skit, that uses ‘born again.’ Nicodemus is trying to figure out how to come out of his mother’s womb a second time, when I think Jesus is trying to tell him he needs to be born of the Spirit.

‘In the dark’ can also be a spiritual reference, as in living in a dark time, or ‘the dark night of the soul.’ After over a year of self-isolation and physical distancing, of lockdowns and restrictions on public gatherings many view the present days as a dark time. We long for lighter, brighter days when we can gather to socialize, to hug one another, to share a meal together, or any one of many other things that we have been denied during the pandemic. One of those other things is our desire to gather together, in one place, to worship the Lord our God, while standing shoulder to shoulder, and singing God’s praises.

I've started taking another short course titled "Church has left the building." The first session was this past Tuesday. In that session, we talked about how the church pivoted from physical worship to digital worship, almost overnight. It wasn't something we had planned to do; it was something we were more or less forced to do. It wasn't something we foresaw; it was something that was completely unexpected. It was something that called for flexibility, creativity, patience, and grace as we all learned something new. We switched overnight to something we had never done before. And, I must say, I am so proud of all of you for being willing to learn how to connect via Zoom, and for your patience with me as I learned something that was not taught at seminary, or in my initial job description.

At the Courageous Church Summit that I attended recently, the head of the United Church of Christ in the US, Rev. Paul Dornhauer, said that after a dark time, be it a mass shooting, the crash of an aircraft, a devastating tornado or flood, or whatever.... after a dark time, when things have settled and returned, more or less, to normal, or new normal, ministers leave the ministry. He said the toll on ministers during a dark time is like the toll on first responders. This happens when the dark time is an event that happens and is over. The pandemic is an ongoing reality that has lasted many months, so far. The question he asked was, "When the pandemic subsides, the question is not if, but how many ministers will leave ministry?"

Back to the "Church has left the building" course. Pivot one took us from physical worship to digital worship. It was sudden and unexpected. Now, we are preparing for pivot number two, a return from exile back to the buildings we left over a year ago. Pivot two is anticipated, but it is not a pivot back to what we left, it is a pivot to something new. They called it phygital ministry. And no, that is not ministry for people with attention deficit who cannot sit still without fidgeting. It is a combination of physical and digital, and is spelled p-h-y-g-i-t-a-l. When we return from exile, many of us will physically gather together, and some of us will continue to join digitally. What may surprise you is, that despite our success in switching from physical worship to digital worship almost overnight, the switch from digital to phygital is filling ministers with dread. We aren't sure how to do it. And so this dark time continues.

I guess the important lesson in the scripture reading today is that Nicodemus went looking for Jesus after sundown, in the dark. The important thing is that Nicodemus found Jesus in the dark. Jesus was there in the dark to be found. This gives me hope that Jesus is there to be found in our times of darkness too. All we need to do is look for him. After all, God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn the world, but to birth the world into new life. Thanks be to God.