

Under Cover of Darkness

John 3:1-17

Ash Wednesday – Muskegon Ministry Area

February 18, 2015

Bishop Deb Kiesey

I was twenty-two years old before I had my first face-to-face encounter with a real, live rat. Now I've known many rats in my lifetime, but I'd never made the acquaintance of one of those furry, four-legged creatures until I lived in Boston.

At that time, Boston University School of Theology was mainly housed in one large building, with classrooms and offices on the lower floors, and dorm rooms on the upper levels. It's quite a nice arrangement, except that it was built when most - if not all - seminary students were male. When women began to enroll, those living quarters weren't quite appropriate, so other arrangements had to be made.

When I went to Boston in 1973, there were a handful of women living in a brownstone house on Bay State Road. We were one of a row of identical homes, just a block or so from the Charles River, each with about five different levels.

The top two floors had several dorm-type rooms, the next floor down was the living area, the basement contained the pantry and kitchen, and the very bottom - even below the kitchen - was the laundry room. It was there I first met a rat - face to face.

Now, I don't really have a problem with tiny, little mice - they might startle me and I don't want them in my house - but they're not particularly scary. These rats, however, were another story. They were huge river rats and they came up from the Charles River. Sometimes I'd see them scurry along the alley behind our house, or occasionally I'd see them cross the street in front of our house and disappear. So I knew they were there.

They never got into the kitchen, but they loved that laundry room.

In my years at Boston, I learned a few things about rats:

- I learned they can be mean,
- I learned they carry all kinds of germs,
- And I learned they love the dark
 - the darker, the damper, the better.

And since we couldn't get rid of them, the best way to keep from seeing them was to know how to approach them.

So, I learned the hard way, that the best way to enter that laundry room was to:

- first, make a lot of noise (so they'd know I was coming),
- then open the door ever so slightly,
- and finally, slip my hand in around the corner, and flip on the light.

That way by the time I walked in they had scurried off to places unknown.

All it took was a little noise and a lot of light.

You see, once you got rid of the darkness, all was well.

There is something about the darkness - for all of us. The dark can be a place to hide - it can be a place of secrecy – a place of anonymity. Perhaps that's why 2000 years ago, a man by the name of Nicodemus chose to come to Jesus by cover of darkness.

Let us pray ...

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and, as you know, Pharisees taught that faith and righteousness were things you earned.

What you wore,
 how you acted,
 the title you carried,
 the sound of your prayers,
 the amount of your gifts
- all these were the measure of your righteousness.

And mostly throughout the gospels the Pharisees were at odds with Jesus.

- His teachings were not the standard teaching
- his actions were unexpected
- his words were threatening to those 'righteous' faithful.

And yet, despite all that, the crowds were listening and following this man - this heretic.

But one Pharisee, a man by the name of Nicodemus, was curious about Jesus.

Perhaps he was moved by the stories he heard.

Perhaps the passion of this teacher stirred him - we don't know.

But for some reason he was drawn to Jesus. The problem was, he couldn't be seen with him - his reputation as a Pharisee was at stake. So he went to him at night - under cover of darkness.

Nicodemus began his conversation with Jesus with polite words:

"Teacher, we know you are a teacher sent from God, because no one can do the miracles you do unless God is with him." (John 3:2)

A compliment. But Jesus ignored it and responded with the strange words:

"I tell you the truth, unless one is born again, one cannot be in God's Kingdom." (John 3:3)

Actually Jesus used a word that can be interpreted in two ways. The word he used was "**anōthen**", and it can mean either '**born again**', or '**born from above**'. So his words could be interpreted as either "**one is born again**", or "**one is born from above**." But with either definition, to Nicodemus, the Pharisee -

the literalist - the legalist - Jesus' words made no sense.

"How can anyone be born after having grown old? How can anyone enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born again?" (John 3:4)

Putting it that way, it does sound ridiculous.

I love the way *The Message* paraphrases this next passage:

"Jesus said, "You're not listening. Let me say it again."

Again Jesus tried to help Nicodemus understand, by comparing the spirit to the wind - you hear it, but you don't know from where it comes. So it is with anyone born of the Spirit.

But Nicodemus still has trouble. His rational mind can't comprehend this.

"How can these things be?"

Until finally Jesus said to him,

"Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ... We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ..."
(John 3:10-12)

The differences between them are great - perhaps too great:

- differences in philosophy
- in theology
- in understanding of righteousness.

And as we leave this evening's scripture we can't help but wonder if Nicodemus would remain in the dark forever.

Spiritual Darkness.

We all struggle with this spiritual darkness at times in our lives.

- Times when pain ... or disappointment ... or fear ... or failure ... or doubts nearly overwhelm us;
- Times when prayer comes hard – or we can't even find the words to pray at all;

Very human times of Spiritual Darkness. Times we all face at some point in our lives – just as did Nicodemus.

We are now beginning the season of Lent – for me The Holiest season of the Christian year.

This is the time we intentionally walk in spiritual darkness;

a time we intentionally explore the dark places of our faith.

A time we look honestly at Who we are – How we act - & What we believe.

The scriptures throughout Lent also intentionally walk us through the final days in the life of Jesus.

Difficult days filled with:

- * Misunderstanding
- Frustration
- Hard choices
- Betrayal
- Denial
- Death

Dark days – but Holy Days.

For me it is especially poignant that here in the Northern Hemisphere, our Lent comes when our world is still in such darkness.

I find that encouraging because as we walk these days with Christ – as we see Christ struggle, we know we are not alone in our struggles.

I don't know what your struggles might be;
I don't now what your darkness is today;

But I do Who calls us out of that darkness.

Christ calls us to follow Him – and to allow Him to lead us from darkness into His Light.

Does that mean everything will be perfect? No.

Does that mean we'll never have doubts? No.

Does that mean we'll have all the answers? No.

Does that mean we'll never have to struggle with darkness again? No.

What it does mean is that with Christ beside us, we can face those times of darkness with hope and faith.

When we place our trust in God - when we fully rely on the power of the Almighty, we begin to move from Spiritual Darkness to Light.

Righteousness - a right relationship with God - comes
not from what we do -
not from church attendance,
not from good deeds,
not from correct doctrine,
but from faith - and faith alone.

And when we forget that we remain in Spiritual Darkness.

It is the words of Jesus that liberates us. He reminds us that everything depends upon faith.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

The Light of Christ illumines all the darkness - of our hearts and souls and minds. It chases away the darkness of fear – it makes clear the path before us – it moves us to deeper faith and courageous acts.

Christ is the light of our world – **“and the darkness shall not overwhelm it.”**

Getting back to Nicodemus:

We don't really know much more about Nicodemus. We don't know if he ever became an open and professing follower of Jesus. But through that conversation with Christ, I believe a seed must have been planted in the darkness of his heart and faith. Something must have happened.

For listen to these words from the end of the Gospel of John.

"After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus at night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.

Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, ... they laid Jesus there." (John 19:38-42)

Strange how a man can go full circle.

The one who'd come at night, now comes in the light of the day.

The one who crept through the shadows to meet Jesus in secret, now comes to the cross to serve the Christ.

And the one who'd received the seed of grace, now participates in planting the greatest seed of all - the seed of eternal life.

Prayer:

Gracious and loving God, as we enter into this holy season, may we all find our way to Christ. I pray that whatever keeps us in darkness might keep us there no longer, and may we find ourselves drawn to the life, death and resurrection of Christ. May we become disciples of that Christ, fearlessly working to transform the world from darkness to light.

May it be so, dear Lord. May it be so. Amen.