

## **“In the Shadows”**

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

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<sup>1</sup>Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” <sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ <sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” <sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

<sup>11</sup>“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>“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.

<sup>17</sup>“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”  
(John 3:1-17)

A good while ago, long before we moved up here to New York, I remember reading a article written by writer named Ada Calhoun. The piece began like this: “It was a Sunday morning in my scruffy Brooklyn, N.Y., neighborhood, and I was wearing a dress. Walking to the subway, I ran into a friend heading home from yoga class. She wore sweats and carried her mat over her shoulder. ‘Where are you going so early all dressed up?’ she asked, chuckling. ‘To church?’ We shared a laugh at the absurdity of a liberal New Yorker heading off to worship.”

The real joke? I totally was.”

She didn’t want to admit to her friend to know that she really was going to church, because, to most of the people she knew in New York, going to church was, at the very least, an odd choice to make -- if not a downright silly choice, a suspicious choice, or even a dangerous choice. To use Calhoun’s words, her friends saw church as “the bane of their youth, the boogeyman of their politics, the very thing they left their small towns to escape.”<sup>1</sup> So, when confronted with the embarrassment of getting busted on the way to that kind of place, Ada just laughed it off and waited until her friend had turned the corner. The title of her article was a humble confession: “I am a closet Christian.”

One gets the impression that Nicodemus was, too. He was at least curious about Christ, but it was not something that he wanted to admit or broadcast in any way. It’s all

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.salon.com/2009/12/21/closet\\_christian/](https://www.salon.com/2009/12/21/closet_christian/)



there in the opening line of the story: *“Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night...”*

Of course he did. Nicodemus wanted to see Jesus, but he didn't want anyone to see him seeing Jesus. He wanted to hear what Jesus had to say, but he didn't want to hear what his friends and colleagues would say if they knew where he was going. I can picture him on the way, as the sun began to set and everyone else was on the way home, and poor Nicodemus turns a corner and runs smack into a cynical pack of Pharisees. ‘Where are you going so late all dressed up?’ they ask. “To see Jesus?” And all of the sudden Nicodemus realizes that he is chuckling with them, laughing at the absurdity of that idea -- that he, a respected member of the Jewish intelligentsia... a learned man who should know better... and a man of status with a great deal to lose... would dare to seek out the upstart, the troublemaker, the law-breaking usurper who was obstinately challenging centuries of religious knowledge and practice. If Nicodemus was known to be associating with Jesus -- or, God forbid, suspected of being a supporter of Jesus -- then his prestige, his position, and his wealth would be very much in jeopardy. So seeking Jesus out would be a very odd choice for Nicodemus to make -- if not a downright silly choice, a suspicious choice, even a very dangerous choice. Best to keep it quiet, stay in the shadows, and come to Jesus under the cover of night.

Still, there was something that drew Nicodemus inexorably toward this risky man from Nazareth. As they meet for the first time, he addresses Jesus as “Rabbi,” a title of lofty respect that was usually reserved only for men who had formally trained in rabbinical studies, as Nicodemus had. His first words to Jesus are ones of reverence, even awe: *“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do [what you have been doing without] the presence of God.”* Nicodemus sees something intriguing, something mysterious but authentic, in the actions of Jesus, and he hears something new, something compelling, in the words of Jesus. The gravitational pull of these things is strong enough that Nicodemus is willing to take a risk to know more.

And yet, at the same time, Nicodemus is also a bit of a skeptic. He is puzzled by some of the things Jesus is saying and teaching, and Jesus' first words to Nicodemus trigger that skepticism. When Jesus says, *“no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,”* the scholar and scientist in Nicodemus could not seem to get past the logical puzzle. It is not physically possible for someone literally to be “born again.”

I think most of us understand this kind of skepticism very well. As the famously cynical comedian George Carlin once observed about religion, “You can tell people there's an invisible man in the sky who created the universe, and the vast majority will believe you. But tell them the paint is wet, and they have to touch it to be sure.”<sup>2</sup> We understand how people can argue that faith, which sometimes seems to fly in the face of logic, must be, *ipso facto*, illogical.

Now, I want to make it clear that I am a firm believer that God gave us the brains we have so that we might use them. I also believe that there is great utility and wisdom in what we call the “scientific method” – the idea that theories about our physical world can and should be tested, challenged, and in some way proven. And I know from personal experience that it can be tough to analyze faith with those methods. I think that is why, when I was first thinking about leaving my law practice to follow a call into the church, I

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<sup>2</sup> <https://quotepark.com/quotes/1411469-george-carlin-tell-people-theres-an-invisible-man-in-the-sky-wh/>

figured that some might view that decision, in some ways, as an illogical move. I had a successful law practice, and each year I would end up earning more money than the last one. I had just made partner, and I liked my law partners. We liked our city. We liked our friends. We liked our church. The future was bright. Why would we leave all that? It seemed like a very odd choice to make -- if not a downright silly choice, a suspicious choice, even a very dangerous choice. So, for a long time, I kept it quiet. I whispered the possibility only in the shadows. In the light of day, I only told a few people – my wife, my parents, my pastor – that I was thinking about leaving the law for the church. Because if I decided that this wasn't the course to take – I didn't want my friends, my partners -- and especially my clients -- to know that I had ever even entertained the thought of flaking out on them.

Now, you know how that all worked out, because here I am. True, at first, the math was difficult to calculate, and the scientific theory of my decision was difficult to prove on paper. But there was and is a powerful poetry of faith, a quest for meaning, a conviction of experience, and an innate hope that all of us have that simply will not go away, that stubbornly refuses to be outnumbered or outweighed by contrary evidence. In the beginning, Nicodemus really struggled with the logic of faith, and the cost of faith, so much that he could only creep toward Jesus quietly and in the shadows. But when he is actually in the presence of Jesus, the experience of the presence and power of God slowly but surely draws him out of the shadows of doubt and into the light.

After this initial meeting, Nicodemus disappears from John's gospel narrative for a while. But when he pops up again a few chapters later, he dares to push back against the Pharisees and scribes who will do anything to get rid of Jesus. He says, at the very least, Jesus deserves a fair hearing and a chance to be heard.<sup>3</sup> Then, he disappears again, just as quickly as he had emerged.

We do not hear about Nicodemus again until the very end of the gospel, but by that time it is clear that he is no longer "a closet Christian." Nicodemus is no longer worried about what others may think, what others may say, or what others may do to him. In the full light of day on Good Friday, he stands shoulder to shoulder with a man named Joseph of Arimathea as the two of them very publicly ask Pilate if they might be allowed to take the body of the crucified Jesus and give him a proper burial.<sup>4</sup> There had never been a more dangerous time to be outed as a disciple, but Nicodemus stands up in the light of day to make his faith fully known.

In a way, Ada Calhoun made the same journey. She wasn't raised in the church. She was raised as a bohemian in the East Village. in the '80s. In her words, she was always fascinated by religions, but she was also baffled by them. In a very scientific way, she tried and tested out a bunch of them. She experimented with Judaism. When she traveled to India, she dabbled in Hinduism, and was actually touched by Mother Teresa, who grabbed her head and blessed her while she was working at the saint's ministry in Calcutta. She was drawn in turn to Buddhism and then Gnosticism. But all of those experiences, she wrote, "were no more formative than the Tolstoy books I read on those 24-hour train trips across India." Nothing clicked.

But when she got married to her husband, the priest who did their premarital counseling was refreshingly real, smart, and eloquent. More importantly, he seemed to be

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<sup>3</sup> John 7:51.

<sup>4</sup> John 19:38-42.

fulfilled, content, and at peace. "He showed me the best side of Christianity," she wrote. "Not how it's right or just, but how -- and this may sound stupid, but it's what I think about religion in general -- it *works*... All of us need help with birth and death and good and evil, and religion can give us that. It doesn't solve problems. [But it does remind] you that, yes, those challenges are real and important and folks throughout history have struggled and thought about them too, and by the way, here is some profound writing on the subject from people whose whole job is to think about this stuff."

Gradually, Ada followed that kernel of faith out into the light. Today, she finds comfort in a community that is rooted in the eternal. She sees faith as "a long table extending backward and forward in time, and everyone who's ever taken Communion is sitting at it." She is at peace with people who are "united in a sense of gratitude for new life and awe in the face of the numinous." And she claims it openly now, even if some of her friends think she's a nut.

Maybe this is what Lent is for us. We might still be skeptics, and we might still be trying to figure out how it all adds up. Maybe we still prefer to keep our curiosity quiet and our options open. But I think we are all here this morning because, despite our skepticism, there is still something that draws us toward faith. The scientist in us struggles to make sense of the world and is curious about the rules, but the poet in us is scanning the horizon for glimpses of deeper meaning, signs of something greater than ourselves, and hints of new light that defies understanding... and it is the poetry of faith that longs to give all of those things the sacred name of "God."

Do not be too hard on yourselves if you are still seeking out Jesus under the cover of night, but do not be surprised if something in that meeting remains with you, calls to you, and eventually draws you out of the shadows and into the light. **Amen.**