

**"THE NIGHT VISITOR....."**

**A SERMON BASED ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
(3:1-21) AND PRESENTED FOR ORLEAN UMC ON  
MARCH 14, 2021---THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT**

**THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THE DARKNESS.**

**UNDER THE COVER OF NIGHT, ONE HEARS THE**

**SOUNDS OF THE NIGHT, AND COUPLES KISS,**

**AND CHILDREN COZY UP TO THEIR PARENTS,**

**AND THE PACE OF LIFE SLOWS WHEN THE SUN**

**GOES DOWN. BUT UNDER THE COVER OF**

**DARKNESS, OTHERS THINGS HAPPEN, TOO.**

**BURGLARS BURGLE, AND VANDALS VANDALIZE,**

**AND THINGS DO GO "BUMP" IN THE NIGHT.**

**YOU PROBABLY RECALL A PARENT --- OR BOTH PARENTS FOR THAT MATTER ----TELLING YOU COUNTLESS TIMES “BE HOME BEFORE MIDNIGHT; NOTHING GOOD HAPPENS AFTER MIDNIGHT.”**

**NOW ALL THESE YEARS LATER I SUPPOSE THEY WAS RIGHT. WHEN I THINK BACK TO ALL THE STUNTS AND STUPID STUFF THAT I PULLED AS A TEENAGER, VERY LITTLE OF IT HAPPENED IN THE LIGHT OF DAY..... BUT WHEN DARKNESS CAME, WHEN OUR DEEDS COULDN'T BE SEEN; IT WAS THEN THAT WE DID THE THINGS WE SHOULD NEVER HAVE DONE.**

**BUT OF COURSE THERE ARE EXCEPTIONS TO EVERY RULE AND THE FOLLOWING ARE JUST TWO EXAMPLES THAT RESPECTFULLY REFUTE THAT CREDO THAT OUR PARENTS SHARED SO OFTEN WITH US.....**

**OVER THE COURSE OF MY MINISTRY THERE HAVE BEEN SOME ROUGH TIMES--- SOME INTERACTIONS WITH MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH WERE NOT GOING WELL---DIFFERENT VISIONS --- DIFFERENT PRIORITIES HAD EMERGED ----AND OUR CHURCH WAS EXPERIENCING THE PAIN AND FRUSTRATION OF SURVIVING IN A CULTURE THAT DID NOT REALLLY APPRECIATE OR HAVE TIME FOR IT.....**

**THERE HAVE BEEN TIMES WHEN I WAS EVEN  
SECOND-GUESSING MY OWN CALL TO MINISTRY.  
THEN ONE NIGHT AS I EXHAUSTEDLY PREPARED  
MYSELF FOR A FEW HOURS SLEEP ON AN  
EXTEMELY INTENSE AND EMOTIONALLY PACKED  
EMMAUS WEEKEND -----SOMEONE KNOCKED ON  
MY DOOR WITH THE DAYS MAIL----AMONG MY  
GREETINGS WAS A CARD FROM SOMEONE THAT  
I BARELY KNEW THANKING ME FOR SOME  
WORDS THAT I THE HOLY SPIRIT HAD LED ME TO  
SHARE EARLIER THAT DAY....THESE FEW WORDS  
REASONATED WITH HER AND OFFERED PEACE  
RIGHT WHERE SHE WAS ... RIGHT THEN AND  
RIGHT THERE.....**

**FOR ME----IT WAS A GIFT ---- A GIFT FROM A  
PERSON THAT I HAD ONLY MET A DAY OR TWO  
BEFORE --- AND ALSO IT WAS A REMINDER THAT,  
EVEN IN DARKNESS, THERE IS SOME LIGHT.**

**THE SECOND STORY HAPPENED IN JERUSALEM,  
SOME 2000 YEARS BEFORE THAT CARD WAS  
DELIVERED..... THE PUBLIC MINISTRY OF JESUS  
WAS JUST GETTING OFF THE GROUND, BUT  
ALREADY HE WAS CAUSING QUITE A STIR  
AMONG THE PEOPLE. HE HAD JUST TURNED THE  
WATER INTO WINE AT A WEDDING RECEPTION;  
THAT WAS THE FIRST OF HIS MANY MIRACLES.**

**AND HE HAD ALREADY TIPPED OVER THE TABLES OF THE MONEYCHANGERS.... . AND NOW, WHILE HE IS VISITING THE HOLY CITY OF JERUSALEM, A MAN COMES TO HIM UNDER THE COVER OF DARKNESS TO ASK JESUS A QUESTION..... BUT IT WAS NOT JUST “ANY MAN.” IT WAS NICODEMUS, A PHARISEE, AND A MEMBER OF THE JEWISH RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL COURT CALLED THE SANHEDRIN. IF THE PHARISEES CAN BE COMPARED TO TODAY’S “RELIGIOUS RIGHT” THEN THE SANHEDRIN WAS THE MORAL MAJORITY. THEY CREATED AND ENFORCED THE RELIGIOUS RULES, AND PUNISHED PEOPLE FOR BREAKING THEM.**

**THEY SPLIT HAIRS, AND AT THE SAME TIME,  
BENT THE RULES TO ACCOMMODATE THEIR  
OWN HYPOCRITICAL LIVES. AND GOD HELP  
THOSE WHO GOT IN THEIR WAY, BECAUSE THEIR  
PERSECUTION COULD BE BRUTAL. AND JESUS  
GOT IN THEIR WAY. IN FACT, AS WE MAKE OUR  
WAY TOWARD GOOD FRIDAY AND THE REASON  
WHY JESUS HAD TO DIE, IT ULTIMATELY BOILS  
DOWN TO THE FACT THAT JESUS GOT IN THE  
WAY OF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT OF HIS DAY, AND  
THEY DIDN'T LIKE IT.**

**SO IT WAS NICODEMUS, A LEADER OF THESE RIGID PHARISEES WHO CAME TO JESUS AT NIGHT, SO THAT NO ONE WOULD SEE HIM, BECAUSE NICODEMUS WAS CURIOUS ABOUT JESUS..... I SAID A MOMENT AGO THAT HE HAD A QUESTION FOR JESUS, BUT THAT'S NOT REALLY CORRECT; RATHER HE HAD A STATEMENT FOR JESUS:**

***“RABBI (OR ‘TEACHER’), WE KNOW THAT YOU COME FROM GOD AS A TEACHER, FOR NO ONE COULD PERFORM THESE SIGNS YOU DO UNLESS GOD WERE WITH HIM.”***



**THAT WAS A HUGE COMMENT; HUGE, BECAUSE  
FIRST OF ALL, NICODEMUS SAID “WE.”**

**APPARENTLY NICODEMUS WAS NOT ALONE IN  
HIS CURIOSITY; APPARENTLY, OTHER**

**PHARISEES SPOKE IN WHISPERED VOICES LATE  
AT NIGHT ABOUT THE IMPACT JESUS WAS**

**HAVING..... BUT IT WAS ALSO APPARENT THAT  
THEY CONSIDERED THE POSSIBILITY THAT**

**JESUS WAS GOD’S SON..... *BY DAY, THEY***

***ARGUED AND ATTACKED AND CONDEMNED AND***

***RIDICULED EVERY ACTION OF JESUS, BUT BY***

***NIGHT, WONDERED IF HE JUST MIGHT BE THE***

***MESSIAH.***

**THE CONVERSATION PROGRESSED RAPIDLY. JESUS TELLING NICODEMUS THAT HE MUST BE BORN AGAIN, NICODEMUS WONDERING HOW HE COULD POSSIBLY CRAWL INTO HIS MOTHER'S WOMB AND BE BORN A SECOND TIME. JESUS SAYING THAT A PERSON MUST HAVE BOTH A PHYSICAL BIRTH AND A SPIRITUAL BIRTH, NICODEMUS NOT COMPREHENDING HOW THIS COULD BE POSSIBLY BE. AND FINALLY, JESUS IS ASTONISHED THAT NICODEMUS, WHO IS SUPPOSED TO BE AN EXPERT AT THESE THINGS DOES NOT GRASP THE MOST ELEMENTARY OF RELIGIOUS TRUTHS.**

**AND THEN JESUS OFFERS NICODEMUS THE  
GREATEST GIFT THAT HE WOULD EVER RECEIVE,  
WHEN HE SAID THESE WORDS:**

**“FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD  
THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON,  
SO THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT  
DIE,  
BUT WILL LIVE FOREVER.”**

**ALL HIS LIFE, NICODEMUS PERCEIVED GOD TO  
BE A HARSH JUDGE; A DEMANDING TASK-  
MASTER WHO MUST BE APPEASED WITH ANIMAL  
SACRIFICES, AND PERFECT OBEDIENCE, AND  
RULES, AND RULES, AND MORE RULES.**

**BUT IN THIS LATE NIGHT CONVERSATION, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HIS LIFE, GOD IS DESCRIBED AS ONE WHO LOVES, AND FORGIVES, AND WELCOMES SINNERS HOME. AND IT CHANGED NICODEMUS' LIFE FOREVER.**

**YOU MAY BE INTERESTED TO KNOW THAT WE ONLY FIND THE NAME OF NICODEMIS MENTIONED TWO MORE TIMES IN THE WHOLE OF THE BIBLE. ONCE, WHILE THE SANHEDRIN IS MEETING, NICODEMUS SAYS THAT THEY MUST NOT BE TOO QUICK TO JUDGE JESUS. WHAT A RISK THAT WAS, STANDING UP FOR JESUS IN FRONT OF HIS PEERS.**

AND THEN AGAIN, ON GOOD FRIDAY, WHEN HE  
AND ANOTHER SECRET FOLLOWER NAMED  
JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA TAKE JESUS' BODY  
DOWN FROM THE CROSS, EMBALM HIM IN  
SPICES, AND LOVINGLY LAY HIM IN A TOMB.

NICODEMUS RISKED HIS STATUS, HIS  
REPUTATION, AND HIS VERY LIFE, ALL BECAUSE  
OF THAT CONVERSATION ONE NIGHT IN  
DARKNESS.

SO NOW, HERE WE ARE, IN RELATIVE DARKNESS  
ON A SUNDAY MORNING IN MARCH --- SOME 2000  
AND MORE YEARS LATER. I WONDER IF JESUS  
WOULD HAVE THE SAME CONVERSATION WITH  
US.

**THERE ARE SOME IN THIS PLACE TODAY WHO  
HAVE GROWN UP IN THE CHURCH. FOR  
DECADES YOU HAVE BEEN PRESENT EVERY  
WEEK AT SUNDAY WORSHIP; YOU'VE SUNG IN  
THE CHOIR, TAUGHT SUNDAY SCHOOL AND  
MAYBE YOU HAVE BEEN A CONFIRMATION  
MENTOR OR A PART OF OUR VACATION BIBLE  
SCHOOL PROGRAM..... YOU'VE SERVED ON  
COUNCILS, BOARDS AND COMMITTEES; YOU'VE  
ATTENDED BIBLE STUDIES, PRAYER MEETINGS,  
MISSION EVENTS AND ANY NUMBER OF OTHER  
CHURCH RELATED ACTIVITIES..... IN SHORT, YOU  
HAVE DONE IT ALL.....**

**AND YET, THERE MAY BE SOME READING THESE WORDS TODAY WHO, LIKE NICODEMUS, HAVE NEVER GRASPED THE MOST ELEMENTARY TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL.....**

**SO YOU HAVE QUESTIONS TODAY: HOW CAN GOD LOVE A SINNER LIKE ME? WHAT DO I HAVE TO DO TO GAIN ETERNAL LIFE? WHAT ABOUT WHEN I DOUBT; WILL GOD REJECT ME WHEN MY FAITH GOES SOUTH?**

**I STAND BEFORE YOU AS A FELLOW SINNER, ONE WHO HAS STRUGGLED WITH THOSE VERY SAME QUESTIONS. BUT AS YOUR PASTOR, I AM CALLED TO SPEAK ON GOD'S BEHALF, AND THIS IS GOD'S MESSAGE TO YOU TODAY:**

**FOR GOD SO LOVED YOU THAT HE GAVE HIS**

**ONLY SON**

**SO THAT YOU WHO BELIEVE MAY NOT DIE**

**BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.**

**ALL THAT WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GOD AND  
JESUS AND OUR SINFULNESS IS CAPTURED IN  
THAT SINGLE VERSE..... MARTIN LUTHER  
CALLED THIS VERSE “THE GOSPEL IN  
MINIATURE.” THE FOUR VERBS IN THAT VERSE  
MAKE THE MESSAGE SIMPLER YET:**



**GOD LOVES  
GOD GAVE  
WE BELIEVE  
WE HAVE LIFE  
END OF STORY  
(REPEAT)**

**WHERE ARE THE RULES? WHERE ARE THE  
STRICT LAWS THAT DEMAND OBEDIENCE?  
WHERE IS THE CONDEMNATION FOR THE TIMES  
WE MESS UP? WHERE ARE THE LEGALISTIC  
REQUIREMENTS THAT THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT OF  
EVERY AGE SEEM TO CREATE SO THAT THEY  
CAN DETERMINE WHO'S IN AND WHO'S OUT?**

**NONE OF IT'S THERE; NOT FOR NICODEMUS, NOT  
FOR ME, AND NOT FOR YOU. ONLY THE FREE  
GIFT OF GRACE, AND ALL THAT IS REQUIRED IS  
THAT WE BELIEVE IT.**

**REMEMBER.....**

**GOD LOVES**

**GOD GAVE**

**WE BELIEVE**

**WE HAVE LIFE**

**BEGINNING OF THE STORY**

**THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THE DARKNESS.  
THE PACE OF LIFE SLOWS WHEN THE SUN GOES  
DOWN, SO THAT WE MIGHT CONSIDER THE MOST  
IMPORTANT TRUTHS OF LIFE.....SO .....BEFORE  
THE LIGHTS RETURN, I WILL REMIND YOU ONE  
MORE TIME:**

**FOR GOD SO LOVED YOU THAT HE GAVE HIS  
ONLY SON  
SO THAT IF YOU BELIEVE, YOU WILL HAVE  
ETERNAL LIFE.**

**PRAISE GOD AND MAY IT BE SO FOR YOU AND  
FOR ME.....AMEN.**