

"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."

It's good to see you all here this morning, in the pews, at the proper time. Because, as you all must be aware, today is the beginning of Daylight Savings Time.

And I was thinking of this thing we do every year, and the name we give to it, "Daylight Savings Time." The days, as we know, are getting longer as we get closer to the summer solstice. We reset our clocks, but we're not really *saving* anything. Daylight is daylight. Darkness is darkness. We are just a people that wants to stay out of the darkness for as many of our waking hours as possible, so all we reset our clocks.

However, for me at least, so many of the most important, transformative moments of my life have come at nighttime, under the cover of darkness.

It was under the starry night skies of Montana that I fell in love with my wife. It was in the solitary, late-night hours that I agonized about where to go to college or whether to go to seminary. In the nighttime, I've assembled in protest and in vigil with neighbors, speaking out against injustice and offering prayers for peace. Around nighttime campfires I've been entrusted with very personal stories and confessions of dear friends, and I've shared some of my own. At night, in the cover of darkness, we go out dancing.

In the darkness, we feel more hidden, covered up, and so we may be more willing to risk something of ourselves; we may feel more free to make ourselves vulnerable or to speak the truth of our hearts out loud. Great and courageous acts of faith happen in the dark.

It is under the cover of darkness, after all, that a Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to Jesus seeking answers to his questions. And it is in the same darkness that Jesus speaks to him that passage of scripture we so often quote, "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."

It is under the cover of darkness – *perhaps* – that God speaks to Abraham and says, "Go! Leave your country for a land that I will show you." Now...it doesn't tell us that it's nighttime in Genesis 12 when God calls Abraham, but I've always imagined it happening that way. Maybe it's because, later in Genesis, God will tell Abraham to look up at the night sky, that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars.

But also, maybe it's because the entire story of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy – a story that begins with this promise made to Abraham – is a story of a

people on the move. God says to Abraham, "Go, leave your homeland for another one." God says to the Israelites who are in slavery under a violent power, "Flee from here into a new land, into freedom." It's one long immigration story. And nighttime, both back then and today, is when so many people have migrated from one land to another – under the cover of nightfall, secretly, trusting by faith that they were heading into a land and a future that God was preparing for them.

By faith, Abraham and Sarah risk being immigrants without a home. And Nicodemus? Well, he also takes a risk, though a less dangerous one. You see, Nicodemus is a man with power and expertise among the Jewish people. He belongs to the group that will later put Jesus on trial for all of the heresies he is teaching. So Nicodemus is risking his reputation; he is risking the unquestioned privilege he enjoys among other Jews. Most of all, he is risking having his own beliefs, his own assumptions, challenged and changed by an encounter with this strange, homeless preacher named Jesus.

So Nicodemus waits until the world is asleep, and it is dark. He comes asking questions of Jesus, and the answers he gets are obscure and strange. You see, Nicodemus comes seeking signs and proof. Instead, what Jesus offers is an invitation into rebirth, new life, life in the spirit. Whoa.

In the dark, Jesus tells Nicodemus that faith in him is like being born again, being born of water and Spirit. Faith in Christ is an entrance into a whole new way of life. Faith is NOT simply clinging onto one simple, propositional truth or being in possession of a secret key to life.

What Nicodemus learns from Jesus is life-changing and world-shaking...but also so simple. He learns that it's really all about LOVE. And it's not about any love that we might have for Jesus or for God. It's about the love that God has already shown for us, before we even asked for it.

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For many, these words – John 3:16 – have formed the cornerstone of what it means to be a Christian. They are words that are waved around in broad daylight at football and baseball games, words that have been shouted loudly in judgment and exclusion at our non-Christian neighbors. But, these words were, in fact, first whispered by Jesus under the cover of nightfall to one who was asking questions of his God in the dark.

"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."

For God so loved the world, that those of us who know the long night of grief after the death of a loved one might have the bold faith to trust that death and darkness is not the final word, that the hope of new life in Christ is true.

For God so loved the world, that those of us who, like Abraham, flee their homelands in fear and desperation under the cover of night, might have the courage to trust that

there is a new land promised by the God who created them, and that fellow believers in this same God will welcome them there in love rather than slam the door shut in fear.

For God so loved the world, that those of us who sit in loneliness or illness or addiction or despair or fear in the long, dark night might know that, just as Jesus did for Nicodemus, God will meet us in the darkness in order to remind us that we have been created in love, by love, and for love.

For God so loved the world...for God so loves you. All of you! All of us! And I hope that, like Nicodemus, we might find a freedom in knowing this. That we respond to this life-changing, world-shaking truth not by obnoxiously waving it around at a sporting event. But that we respond to this freedom by risking something of ourselves.

For Abraham, God says "Go," and he goes. Leaves it all behind. He doesn't know where he is going but he trusts that God will provide whenever he gets there. He risks his livelihood, his security, and his future.

And what of Nicodemus? What does he risk? Well...that's a slightly different story. But I think it might be one that more closely resembles the stories of those of us who, like myself, enjoy a life of relative privilege and security. Those of us who maybe even think we've got this faith and belief thing all figured out.

Because Nicodemus, well...first he takes a risk by even talking to Jesus in the first place. But then, this skeptic Pharisee...he changes. After he walks away from this nighttime encounter with Jesus, he is never quite the same. He understands, somehow, that having faith in Christ is not simply a private, personal thing. He understands, somehow, that it's not simply about winning an argument or possessing a truth.

Because, at the end of John's gospel, a little later in the story...we see the privileged Nicodemus stepping forward not in darkness but in broad daylight in order to bring the crucified body of this same Jesus down from the cross so that he might care for his wounded and broken body. Nicodemus anoints the body of Jesus with expensive myrrh and aloe, tenderly wraps it in linen cloths, and then buries it in a tomb.

God so loved the world. God so loved Nicodemus. God so loves YOU. May we all, like Nicodemus, let this love inspire us to risk something of ourselves. To recognize that faith draws us into attending to the wounds of the suffering, to the welcome of the stranger, to death itself. Finally, faith in Christ's love means trusting that *nothing* – not even death – will ever be able to separate us from it.

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This love is for all of us, and it will show us the way to eternal life, both here on earth and in the hereafter. Thanks be to God.