In Praise of Darkness

A sermon by John Strommen on John 3:1-21 Jan. 28, 2018

Some of you are familiar with the movie *The Truman Show*, a story – like Nicodemus - about one man’s journey for truth. Truman Burbank is a man who has grown up and lived every minute of his life in a television studio - the largest studio ever built, complete with a town on an island surrounded by water that appears to be an ocean. Here’s the catch. Truman thinks his world is real, but everyone in this world is a paid actor, every ray of sunshine is from a giant lightbulb, all of this orchestrated inside a giant dome by the director. Truman is in fact the subject of an around the clock TV show called the Truman Show. But eventually he picks up clues that his world is not real, that he’s trapped and he’s not really living. So one night under the cover of darkness, he sets out on a journey to discover the real world at the end of his world. The creator of the TV show tries to catch him and discourage him before he breaks free from the deception, but Truman prevails until he reaches the end of the world as he knows it and is faced with a decision about where to go from there....

(“Truman Show” clip)

Have you ever felt like your life was counterfeit, shallow, flat – lacking in depth, dimension or transcendence?

A long time ago there was a man named Nicodemus, who, like Truman, felt in his gut that something was missing, that somehow his world was a shallow imitation of what was really real. A man named Jesus had spoken with authority about the Kingdom of God being near and Nicodemus wanted to find it, so he sought out Jesus.

Now Nicodemus was one of the most powerful men in the Jewish world. He was a Pharisee, which was kind of like a bishop. Think of it. Nicodemus is highly educated, powerful, respected in his society, and wealthy. Yet, somehow all those things – power, wealth, respect, knowledge, even religion – seemed hollow, counterfeit. Nicodemus perhaps felt that he was living only in a kingdom created by people, not God, so one night in the darkness he set out to find Jesus and talk to him.

Now, it’s not insignificant that Nicodemus went to Jesus in the dark. There is a double meaning here. Darkness was in this culture a symbol of ignorance and separation from God. So the darkness clearly suggests Nicodemus’ separation from God, and his desire to move out of it into the light.

But there is another sense to the darkness here. The ruling body of which Nicodemus was a part had not taken kindly to Jesus. They respected him, but clearly viewed him as a threat. So, Nicodemus showing an interest in Jesus would not have been appreciated by Nicodemus’ peers. Nicodemus needed to make his trip to Jesus under the cover of night, in secret. So darkness also represents opportunity – opportunity to seek truth and to embrace experiences they couldn’t otherwise. This view of darkness is seen in a long standing rabbinic tradition of Jesus’ time, namely, studying God’s law at night by candlelight. So, darkness is also an unencumbered space and time to seek and learn.
A brilliant example of such flourishing in darkness is found during the period of slavery in America. Slaves were not allowed to assemble in Christian worship on their own – only if their master invited them to worship with his family. It is well known that slaves were inspired by the story of Nicodemus going out at night to seek Jesus, because like Nicodemus, they, too, were forbidden for different reasons to assemble in Jesus’ name. And so, sometimes slaves would use the cover of night to worship Jesus in their own way. It was likely at such times that they created African American spirituals.

And so Nicodemus finds Jesus, and rather than ask him a question, he merely states, “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.”

I think Jesus quickly perceived that Nicodemus was a seeker who was having doubts about the world he lived in, doubts that his religious’ life wasn’t tethered to the divine and transcendent. What if the world of the Pharisee was as scripted and controlled and counterfeit as Truman’s world?

So Jesus cuts to the chase, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” The word “see” here means to experience, participate in, be a part of. “Well,” reasons Nicodemus, “how can I be born more than once?”

Jesus responds, “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” In other words, a birth that is from waters of the natural world, but from the Spirit of God, too. This means to participate in a new creation that is birthed and nurtured within the old creation of our daily life.

So this is no self-improvement program! We cannot say, “I’m going to be born again today,” or “I’m going to birth myself!” It’s something given to you, this birth from above, just like your natural birth. Jesus likens it to the wind. We don’t control it at all. And yet we experience it. It comes to us. In Jesus, God promises that it comes to us, and all we can do is receive it in faith.

It doesn’t say exactly how Nicodemus responded to this conversation in the night. He didn’t decisively walk through the door like Truman did. And yet, from accounts later in the gospels, it’s clear that Nicodemus was changed. He was a defender of Jesus and he helped fund his burial.

I think you and I are a bit like Nicodemus. We, too, have questions and are seeking truths not entirely clear to us as we live in a pluralistic and often not very spiritual world. What does Jesus have to offer us? How does our faith relate to other faiths? Why does my life seem shallow sometimes? Does our participation in the kingdom of God include the present, or just the next life?

And as a church, if we are honest, we are like Nicodemus, too, or should be. We don’t see where things are headed. We fear that our church life is missing something essential for the immediate future and we want to discover what that is. And yet we also fear questions, not being in control. Well, just remember what little control we have over the wind!

I want to close today in praise of darkness, the darkness we find in our text. The darkness that signifies inquiry and learning, a safe space to pursue questions, conversations, and discernment. The darkness that means we recognize our own ignorance and separation from God. In the midst of such darkness, we
are being called today to seek conversations with the living God, and, because we do not know the way, learn to let God lead us.

I would even suggest to you that our future depends on not being afraid of the dark, but rather fostering and embracing these kinds of spaces where seeking and conversation can take place with Jesus and each other. How effective are we at Mt Carmel at providing this kind of darkness - a safe space to pursue questions and seek a deeper truth? We do not need to be afraid of this darkness for the simple reason that Jesus meets us there with a proclamation: in faith, we are born from above and participants in the kingdom of God. So, like Truman, walk through that door. Amen.