
Night Light

John 3:1-17

A Duke Chapel sermon preached in Baldwin Auditorium on May 31, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

"I remember the night, the most horrendous of my life: "...Eliezer, my son, come here...I want to tell you something...Only to you...Come, don't leave me alone...Eliezer..." I heard his voice, grasped the meaning of his words and the tragic dimension of the moment, yet I did not move. It had been his last wish to have me next to him in his agony, at the moment when his soul was tearing itself from his lacerated body—yet I did not let him have his wish. I was afraid. Afraid of the blows. That was why I remained deaf to his cries. Instead of sacrificing my miserable life and rushing to his side, taking his hand, reassuring him, showing him that he was not abandoned, that I was near him, that I felt his sorrow, instead of all that, I remained flat on my back, asking God to make my father stop calling my name, to make him stop crying. So afraid was I to incur the wrath of the SS. In fact, my father was no longer conscious. Yet his plaintive, harrowing voice went on piercing the silence and calling me, nobody but me. 'Well?' The SS had flown into a rage and was striking my father on the head: 'Be quiet, old man! Be quiet!' My father no longer felt the club's blows; I did. And yet I did not react. I let the SS beat my father, I left him alone in the clutches of death. Worse: I was angry with him for having been noisy, for having cried, for provoking the wrath of the SS. 'Eliezer! Eliezer! Come, don't leave me alone...' His voice had reached me from so far away, from so close. But I had not moved. I shall never forgive myself. Nor shall I ever forgive the world for having pushed me against the wall, for having turned me into a stranger, for having awakened in me the basest, most primitive instincts. His last word had been my name. A summons. And I had not responded."

These words of Pulitzer prize winner Elie Wiesel recount the horror of the Holocaust in his original and longer Yiddish version of the book that was later called *Night*. He retells the pain of being taken away from their home in Transylvania to the Auschwitz concentration camp and then to Buchenwald in 1944. *Night* is a haunting literary memorial of the death of his family and his innocence in the encounter with evil. He tells his memories so that such terror as the Holocaust would never be allowed again. *Night*. There's something about the night. "Never shall I forget that night," he writes, "the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed." The pain and horror, the long night, of seeing a child hanging and hearing someone groan the words, "'For God's sake, where is God?' And from within me, I heard a voice answer: 'Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows.'" In the night, it can be easy to think Nietzsche was telling the truth when he proclaimed, "God is dead."

We have so many stereotypical images of the night. And nighttime is not viewed as the time of God, generally. It is the domain of vampires. Ghosts. Creepy sounds like howls. Screams. A time to close the blinds. Hide under beds. Bolt the doors. The night is considered dangerous, not a time to hang outside with friends but to rush inside as fast as you can because of the darkness and the bogeyman. The night is when special covert military operations take place to avoid the light of day. The night is somehow linked with not seeing clearly so we shun and run away from the night. We can't stand nightmares. We avoid the dark side of characters such as Darth Vader from *Star Wars*. We sing Taizé Community worship songs like "do not let my darkness speak to me."

But "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..." The wind or spirit is uncontrollable, elusive, unpredictable so mysterious, so unlike what we predict or know or assert with confidence. The spirit, the holy wind, therefore, is not surprisingly alive in the night, not dead but fully living, breathing, birthing new life, even in the dark of night. We may not be able to handle darkness, but God can.

This is not what we traditionally think when we consider the presence of God. Yet, "If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there"(Ps 139). Wherever you may find yourself, God is there, even in the night. Nicodemus "came to Jesus by night." Nicodemus has impressive credentials—a Pharisee and a leader of the

Jews. He has status and political pull. A highly public role. There are all kinds of theories about why he goes to Jesus under a shroud of darkness. Gail O'Day, dean of Wake Forest Divinity School, observes, "Nicodemus is a public figure, but he does not come to Jesus publicly. Nicodemus's night visit suggests that he wants to hide himself." His public persona is less visible in the night and some argue that "his self assurance [is] a façade." I don't want to judge the motives of Nicodemus but maybe he doesn't want to show his need to everyone else, or even his lack of spiritual understanding because it's clear from his exchange with Jesus that he doesn't understand fully. None of us have been there, right? It's clear that Nicodemus has some sort of need. Otherwise, he wouldn't have gone to Jesus.

Maybe he goes to Jesus at night because sometimes it's only at night when we are true to ourselves. No one is looking but God. No labels. No credentials. No public personas. Just 'Nicodemus.' Just a child of God with needs. The nighttime, though dark, may be when we see ourselves most plainly because we aren't blinded by the glamor and glitz of the day. In the day, we see his public persona, his power and his glory, while at night we see the hunger of his heart. At night, he came to Jesus on the "DL," the down low, perhaps because of his stature in his community. At night, he could truly be who he was because no one else was looking. At night, we may come to terms with our own dark night of the soul, which is why some want to avoid the night. At night we may come to realize that who we are in the broad daylight is not who we want to be. So despite what the movies portray and popular stereotypes and to avoid our own darkness speaking to us and perhaps destroying us, at night, we yearn for Jesus, the Word of God, to speak words. "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." At night, we may realize that we can't handle life on our own regardless of our worldly stature. At night, we realize that we can't handle the night of our soul so we seek a night light to be a lamp unto our feet and a light for our path. We seek a light, a morning star even when darkness encamps all around us. We seek Jesus, the one John declares is "the light of all people and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Nicodemus came to the light at night.

Don't underestimate or disregard the night. The night is not our nemesis because "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..." The spirit breathes and blows even in the nighttime, suggesting a new understanding of ghosts in the night. This one is a Holy Ghost who gives birth to light and life in the dark. "Nicodemus came to Jesus by night." Jesus was already in the dark showing us how God moves not just in the light of day but in the dark of night because there are no restrictions on time and place for the work of the Spirit. At night, we may close our windows but when the wind is blowing we may still feel a slight breeze coming through, trying to work its way into our lives. We hear it pressing on the windows to get our attention as God calls to us. It's not a knock at the door but a holy wind on a window. We may try to shut it out because we're afraid of the mystery and the uncontrollable and elusive path, the unknown character of the all-knowing One. Yet for a people "born of the Spirit," spiritual surprises are par for the course, just like the wind, which comes from and goes to places you don't know or wish you didn't know, like the night.

All of us must face the night. In the Spirit and in life, births happen all night long. Life comes in the night as well. It may be dark but darkness doesn't diminish the presence of God and God's light, Jesus Christ. The biblical witness shows us otherwise. John tells us that the light shines *in* the darkness (John 1:5). In Acts, when Paul and Silas were thrown in jail, put in an inner cell and feet fastened, we're told that it was "about *midnight* that they were praying and singing hymns to God" and "suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose" (Acts 16). At night. The psalmist speaks to God and declares, "even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you"(Ps 139:12). The psalmist even reminds us elsewhere that "by day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at *night* his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life"(Ps 42:8). Nicodemus came to Jesus at night.

And at night, there is a light that shines from an empty tomb because 'early on the first day of the week, *while it was still dark*, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.' New life and new creation are born "while it was still dark."

We've demonized darkness and the night long enough and so much that we forget that we can only see the dancing light of fireflies when it is dark. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. And the fire of the Spirit will dissipate your darkness so "welcome the darkness without fear or doubt" (James Weldon Johnson). Don't be afraid of the dark for there is a night light. Jesus is the light, the light of all people, the light of the world, the Bright and Morning Star, Daystar shining on us at nighttime. So I encourage you to go to him tonight and every night, our vespers light who was born to save the world because God so loved the world. God so loved you. Walk in the light, and he will guide your feet to eternal life. Then you'll be able to testify to others:

When the night has come

And the land is dark

And the moon is {perhaps} the only light we'll see

No I won't be afraid

Oh, I won't be afraid

Just as long as you, {Jesus} stand, stand by me (Ben King)