

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Nicodemus based on John 3:1-2; 7:50-51; 19:38-40 on March 8, 2015 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: People of the Passion
Today's Focus: The Silent Believer

"When Curiosity Becomes Courage Because of Christ"

Dear Lord Jesus, you became one with us in death that we might look to you for life. Amen.

Have you ever been presented with an opportunity where you thought, "Hmm...interesting, but what's in it for me?" Now I'm not asking for a show of hands, but be honest, how many of you were thinking, "Um...pretty much every opportunity"? Because that's kind of the default setting of human beings to look at life from the perspective of looking out for numero uno, isn't it?

For example when I was in college I had the opportunity to go on a study trip to Germany to tour the places where the great reformer of the church, Martin Luther, himself once lived. But why did I want to go? So that I could learn about history and the important truths of the Bible that were re-discovered during the Lutheran Reformation? Well sort of. I actually do like history very much by the way. But to be perfectly honest my biggest reason was because I knew that a certain person would also be on that trip. And that certain person—well her name is Sarah and she's now my wife of 11 years! So you could say that definitely did work out well for me. However in marriage as in life there needs to be a shift from thinking "What's in it for my personal benefit?" to "What's within my power to be a blessing to others?"

Today as we continue this series *People of the Passion* we're going to see how that shift happened in a surprising way to a guy named Nicodemus. We're going to look at three little vignettes from his life to see how his life gradually changed from "What's in it for my personal benefit?" to "What's within my power to be a blessing to others?" It's a story that I pray also takes place in your life. It's a story that I pray takes place over and over again here in our community as our church reaches out into people's lives. It's a story of what **happens when curiosity becomes courage because of Christ.**

***John 3:1-2** - Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."*

So our first little vignette we might call, *Nick at Night*. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night! He comes because of curiosity. Last week you may recall I asked the question, "How come, if Jesus was so awesome, everyone wanted him dead?" You remember the answer? They didn't. Many people saw, heard, and experienced the miraculous signs Jesus performed. They couldn't deny them. So a lot of people believed in Jesus. Many others started getting curious about Jesus. They had questions. Nicodemus was one of them. It's just that he was also a Pharisee, one of the 70 members of the Sandhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was expected to already have all the answers. He was supposed to be Mr. Educated. Mr. Religious Expert. And you know how it is in circles like that. You're not supposed to let anyone know if you start to think, "Hmm, I just don't know."

So why did Nicodemus go to Jesus at night? Because he didn't want any of his peers to find out he had questions. Here's a little color to the story for you. Later in John chapter 12 we're told ⁴² *Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue;* ⁴³ *for they loved human praise more than praise from God.*

The Pharisees intimidated a lot of people. They had a reputation for being know-it-alls. They had a reputation for being legalistic. If you challenged them, look out! Because they had the power to boot you out of the community. That's why Nick went to Jesus at night. Peer pressure is a powerful thing, isn't it? But hey, at least deep down Nicodemus was willing to admit to himself that maybe he didn't have all the answers. Maybe there was some uncertainty that he felt about life. Maybe, just maybe, Jesus Christ had something that Nicodemus knew he lacked. At the very least Nicodemus wanted to find out from Jesus himself instead of just hearing stuff second hand. He was willing at least to seek Jesus himself to see if Jesus had answers to his questions. He was curious.

How about you, friends? Do you have all the answers already? I used to think this way when I was in high school. Like I knew it all. Like I was smarter than my parents who were Christians. - I've learned a few things over the years. Truth be told though I'm still learning every day. But I wonder how many people think they've already got it all figured out. People say they believe stuff because of science but what do they really know for sure? People say they believe something because they watched a show about it on TV, but what makes them so sure they didn't just hear one side of the story? People say they have an opinion because they've found all these other people online who agree with them but how do they know their group is right in the grand scheme of things? People sometimes say you can't know anything for sure because there is no objective truth, that you can't really label anything right or wrong, except that they'll be sure and tell you that your point of view is wrong. That, at least, they know for sure. Friends, how about you? Do you have all the answers on your own? Or do you have some questions?

You know it's not wrong to have some questions. What matters is where you go for answers. In fact it's better to come to Jesus having lots of questions than thinking you have all the answers! That's actually one of the reasons I sometimes have the sermon Q and A where I ask you to text me your sermon questions and then I try my best to answer some of them during the service based on the Bible. At the very least I hope that by having a Q and A what that says about our church is, "Here's a place where the pastor has strong convictions but where it's ok to come and ask questions. Where it's ok to start even at square one. And sometimes even where we can be humble and honest enough to admit that we don't have all the answers." That was Nicodemus. He came to Jesus curious. That was a great place to start. And that takes us to our next vignette from Nick's life.

John 7:45-51- *45 Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and the Pharisees, who asked them, "Why didn't you bring him in?" 46 "No one ever spoke the way this man does," the guards replied. 47 "You mean he has deceived you also?" the Pharisees retorted. 48 "Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? 49 No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on*

them.” 50 Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, 51 “Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?”

So friends, do you notice what’s happened here? First of all, some time has gone by. Opposition to Jesus has ramped up. And all of sudden now, who do we hear speaking up? Nicodemus! It sounds like a brave thing that he’s doing, doesn’t it? Someone who’s only thinking, “What’s in it for me?” doesn’t stick out their own neck like this. What happened? Seeking Jesus led Nicodemus to start speaking up for Jesus.

Now this is a question for those of you who already consider yourselves Christians. So if you’re not a Christian you get a pass on this one but you’re welcome to keep listening, ok? Friends, when’s the last time you spoke up for Jesus? When’s the last time you shared your faith as if it really meant something to you? When you invited someone to church because you so badly wanted to them to hear the message you know they need? If I asked your neighbors—“Do you know whether or not your neighbor here is Christian and how do you feel about that?” what would they say? Well you know what, friends? Nicodemus wouldn’t have scored too highly on that test either. Here in the verses I read we see him standing up for Jesus. But did you notice what the Pharisees also said? 48 *“Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? 49 No!* So apparently Nicodemus was more a secret believer than a public one. None of his professional colleagues even seemed to know.

Remember last week, when Caiaphas the High Priest said, *“It is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish,”* (John 11:50), do you remember what Nicodemus said as this scheme to have Jesus killed was being set into motion? ... That’s right, nothing! At least Scripture doesn’t record him saying anything. It’s like he had a zipper on his mouth. We hear nothing. But what we see is that everyone was motivated by fear. The Jewish ruling council—fear of the Romans. Nicodemus—fear perhaps of being kicked out of the council and losing his position. Pontius Pilate even—he sends Jesus to die knowing full well Jesus was an innocent man simply out of a fear that if the Jews got out of control he might lose his job. They were cowards—all of them. And I’m going to say Nicodemus was too in the moment of Jesus’ greatest need because we don’t hear him saying anything. And in that way I have to admit that Nicodemus is no different than me for all the times I’ve stood there with my mouth shut for lesser fears like someone making fun of me.

So Pilate sent Jesus to die on the cross on Good Friday. The Roman soldiers who were professional executioners were surprised how quickly Jesus died. The One who called himself the light of the world, his life was snuffed out it seemed by the darkness. So a soldier stuck his spear in Jesus’ side just to make sure he was dead. Out poured a flow of blood and water. Death was confirmed. And there hung Jesus’ corpse on the cross, bleeding out, skin shredded, a wretched mess. Sure sounds like the end of the story, doesn’t it?

But it wasn’t! 3 days later Jesus rose from the dead! And even before that... for Nicodemus there’s a part three. **John 19:38-40** ³⁸ *Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate’s permission, he came and took the body away.* ³⁹ *He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.* ⁴⁰ *Taking Jesus’*

body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.

Friends, are you kidding me? Jesus had been brutally killed. All of Jesus' most loyal, dedicate disciples had scurried away. The Sabbath began that same evening and there wasn't a lot of time. Jesus' body could just as well have been hastily thrown into the valley of Gehenna and burned. But instead Jesus Christ, condemned criminal, got a special burial fit for a king. He was buried in a rich man's tomb (Did you know this was prophesied? Cf. Isaiah 53:9). It belonged to a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea. But who was right there with him? Nicodemus. We learn here Nicodemus was apparently a wealthy man himself. 75 pounds of expensive spices was an amount typically spent only for a royal burial.

We don't hear Nicodemus saying anything here, but his actions speak louder than words. At a time when Nicodemus' actions could've been helping to prepare to his own tomb if you know what I mean, he wanted to do what he could to help prepare his Savior's. This is not the action of a man thinking, "What's in it for my personal benefit?" anymore. He was thinking, "How can I honor Christ?" So he used his wealth for the benefit of someone else, to honor Christ in spite of the risk to his own safety.

What changed, friends? I think it all came together for Nicodemus as he surveyed the whole scene of Jesus' dying on the cross. Many of the members of the Jewish ruling council, his colleagues, stood there as Jesus was crucified. They mocked him. Taunted him. Ridiculed him. But Jesus didn't return the insults in kind. Instead he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And before he died Jesus cried out, "It is finished." And then there was an earthquake and the curtain in the temple that separated the people from the presence of God in the most holy place was torn from top to bottom. It was a powerful sign that the way into God's presence was now open to all, accomplished by the death of God's Son, the innocent Lamb of God, Jesus the Christ. So what Nicodemus failed to do to honor Jesus as his Savior when he was alive, he did for him after he died. He had moved from curiosity to courage because of Christ. He had moved from fear to faith by knowing all his sins had been forgiven. Friends, yours are too!

Where are you at on your spiritual journey? Are you curious? Have questions? Good, you're in the right place! Keep seeking Jesus! Find him in his Word. If you're new today please accept this free gift. It's a book called "All About Jesus" which contains the story of Jesus from the Bible. Start reading. Ask questions. Bring them to Bible 101 class with me next.

Some of you, maybe it's time for you to start speaking up for Jesus though. Yes? We believe! Yet how many people around us have no idea why Jesus died on the cross or the hope we have because he followed it up by rising victoriously from the dead? What keeps us from speaking up and sharing our faith with others? *"Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent"* (Acts 18:9).

And maybe, for some of you, it's time to act. It's time to volunteer. It's time to help a neighbor. It's time to start giving generously without fear. What does a meaningful and significant step closer to Jesus look like for you?

Let's go to Jesus and pray about that as we close today. Dear Jesus, thank you for meeting us where we're at. You came into this world as one of us so that you can identify with us in our weakness. Thank you for welcoming us when we come to you like Nicodemus out of curiosity with our questions—that you won't ever turn us away. Patiently guide us to find answers through your Word. And empower us to not only speak up for you but also to act in ways that honor you. Shift our thinking away from the question, "What's in it for my personal benefit?" to "What's within my power to be a blessing to others?" Jesus, you know just where each of us is at in life. Wherever we're at, keep taking us from having curiosity to having courage. And every time we slide back, assure us your victory at the cross where you won our full and free forgiveness. In fact help us understand that the more we see the fullness of your victory, the greater our courage will be. Amen!

My Next Steps

Point to Ponder: It's better to come to Jesus having lots of questions than thinking you have all the answers.

Treasure to Share: *"Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent" (Acts 18:9).*

Action(s) to Take: Where are you at on your faith journey? If you're curious like Nicodemus, seek Jesus by starting to read the Bible or taking part in Pastor Ben's next Bible 101 class. If you've been keeping silent for too long, think about a situation in which God is calling you to speak up for or about Jesus. If you've been hesitating to act, pray that God gives you the courage to do what you know is right to help someone else for their benefit this week. How can you, like Nicodemus, use the resources God has given you to be generous when it's in your power to act?