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## Sermon of February 17, 2008 Dr. Jim Standiford

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### “LESSONS FROM LOSERS: 2. QUESTIONS IN THE DARK OF NIGHT”

Genesis 12:1-4a  
John 3:1-17

*Eternal God, throughout these forty days of Lent, enable us to prepare ourselves, our hearts, and our minds to receive the new life that you have for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Do you have questions that keep scrolling through your mind as you try to go to sleep at night? Are your dreams ever just vaguely disguised wrestlings with haunting questions? Do you ever wake up and then have your mind race from one issue to the next, and the next, and the next? Many of us do, so I asked some of our members and staff this week, “What are your questions in the dark of night?”

Here are some responses: I try to figure my finances to see if I can keep my house. I worry about how I will care for my parents. Am I passing through life too passively? Am I making the tough decisions or just coasting on cruise control? I wonder if what I do for my children is the right thing.

We have some humorists in the crowd. They asked: Did I close the garage door? Is that you, God, or do I need some Pepto-Bismol? Why is the street-sweeper running at 4:00 a.m.? Am I going to step on the dog when I get out of bed? What is that noise on the roof?

In a more serious vein: Is death to sin an instant thing or do we really gotta work for it? How will I pay for assisted living? I try to let go of what upsets me from other people. Doubts, fears, and insecurities are what come and stand around my bed at night. I ask for a clear sense of God’s purpose for me, what to let go of, what to do with my energy. How can I incorporate God’s word in my daily living? What is next, eternal life? What can I expect?

If you have questions in the dark of night, you are not alone. Many people are sleepless in San Diego, Seattle, and many other places because of these questions.

Our two scripture passages today are both call passages. They are very different because people are different. Some folk insist everyone has to experience God just like they do. However, God realizes we are different and calls us differently.

Abram is getting up there in years, he is 75, he is comfortably at rest in a village of his own people, and yet God calls him to leave his country, family, and his ancestral home place. He is called to go to a land far away. Sometimes personal change is reinforced by changes in the outward circumstances of our lives. What Abram's call was about was a total dependence on God. To this point Abram has spoken no words and barely acted. Regardless, God calls him and brings him to a new day, a new birth.

Abram is touted in scripture as one who acted by faith and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. (Hebrews 11, Romans 4:3) He was viewed as one who trusted in God. One can't help but wonder though, if some nights as he traveled and lay looking up at the stars if he didn't have questions that kept him awake: Where are we going? What will it be like? Who is this God who is calling me? Will God be faithful to me, or leave me stranded?

Early in our ministry we took a youth group trip floating down the Green River in Utah. One night the senior minister, Mary Lou, and I were all laying in our sleeping bags in a fan shape with our heads close so we could talk. As we lay on the sand beside the river, rain pouring down on us, soaked to the bone, the senior minister muttered under his breath, "What am I doing here? I have a loving wife and a nice warm bed at home, why am I here?" We have all had questions in the dark of night. There are still many such questions in the Middle East for the promises to Abraham of blessings for all the families of the earth are yet unrealized. The children of Abraham continue to terrorize each other geographically and scripturally. All of us seem much more interested in protecting turf than following God.

The story of Nicodemus is a call story as well. Nicodemus comes to Jesus, where God went to Abram, but this too is a call story nonetheless. Nick is described as a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. The Jewish religious establishment was strongly against Jesus so Nick's act here is a bit unusual. Nick is someone important, perhaps even in the Sanhedrin or some other important position, but he is also a seeker.

He is trying to learn more about the life of the spirit. He is looking for more in his personal life of faith. There are many such seekers in our world today. They sense there is something more to life than what they have experienced and so they explore.

Nick comes at night. Some have said he was timid, embarrassed, afraid to be associated with Jesus because it might cost him his reputation and position. Others have said the reference to night is symbolic, signifying he was in the dark, that he was spiritually ignorant. Yet others claim the rabbis taught that the Torah was best studied at night because it was quiet and there were fewer distractions. Perhaps Nick uses this prime study time to seek a second opinion on the sacred texts, and the questions in his own heart. If you have a specific time when you do your best work, you know you don't like to squander that time on trivial pursuits. Some things you can read in front of the TV; but for others you need your special chair, lamp, and the dog not pestering you to play ball. For whatever reason, Nick comes at night and unlike other Pharisees mentioned in scripture he does not seem to be testing Jesus but compliments him. He recognizes that Jesus has some special relationship to God. (Remember, in John's gospel Jesus is always God in human flesh and God's self-revelation).

Jesus receives Nick as a pilgrim, as a sincere religious seeker. Jesus welcomes him, his searching mind, and his questions. He does not seek to embarrass Nick or condemn him. Rather, Jesus offers him the possibility of new life.

All of us have some limitations because of such factors as our background, the community in which we were brought up, the type of education we received, or lack thereof. The Pharisees were known as the "word" people of their day. They were left-brained, legal scholars, word-parsers. Jesus, on the other hand, comes from a different perspective, right brain, heart-language, story-telling, with fertile images of wind, spirit, and abundant love.

The gospel writer John delights in symbolism, missed connections and double meanings. These literary elements appear repeatedly in his gospel and are employed in Nick's story to show the differences between Nick and Jesus, but also to invite Nick and all who read his story to new life. It is in the misunderstanding, the missed connection of ideas, between Jesus and Nick, that our questions of the night might be answered.

The Greek word *anōthen*, can mean "again," "from above," or "anew." When Jesus says we need to be born of water and the Spirit he is speaking of our birth of flesh in the water of the womb, but also then the need to be born of the Spirit, that is again, anew, or from above. He is saying we need a spiritual rebirth, an internal rebirth, a personal transformation. He continues by referring to the wind. Wind is another word for Spirit. Jesus is saying our transformation is not something we can manufacture; it is the Spirit's doing when we are open to the Spirit. He uses metaphors such as "dying and rising," "taking up the cross," and being "lifted up" all for the concept of transformation. To be born again is to die to the old way of always looking out for ourselves and being born to the new way, Jesus' way, of giving life to others. Jesus is saying to this seeker named, Nick, faith is more than knowing the law. What is needed is an experience of God, an experience that will transform our life, make us into a new person. Sometimes the experience is dramatic and the change is instantaneous. Other times, in other people, it is a process over time. Perhaps for some there are plateaus, for others, there may be some steps backward; but the Spirit of God is always calling us to new life.

Jesus ends his dialogue with Nick with a general invitation. He states God loves the world and invites everyone, without exception, into relationship with God. That is our salvation. It is an invitation offered in love without condemnation. Nick appears to have come to an understanding of what Jesus was saying and become a disciple, for John, near the end of his gospel, states Nick helped Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial after the crucifixion. (19:39-40)

We all know any given statement or passage of scripture can be heard in different ways because of the different situations of people's lives. For American slaves, Nick's night visit to Jesus was proof that it was possible to come to Jesus even when those in power forbade it. Though Nick appears to not understand Jesus' invitation to new life, the slaves did understand and embraced Jesus' offer. The actions of Nick gave them courage to pursue their faith in the dark nights of slavery.

Liberation theologian, Gerald West, from South Africa says in our day, Jesus may call us to be "born from below." By that he means the radical new view called for by Jesus might be understood better if we were to attempt to see God, the world, and ourselves from the perspective of the poor and oppressed. Jesus certainly has great concern for the poor. If we look "from below" we would see a different reality from what we see from our perspective of comfort and privilege.

Whatever our present perspective, the season of Lent is a time for us to seek a new relationship with God. It is a time for us to examine not only our perspective, but our way of living. It is a time for us to respond to Jesus' invitation to a new abundant life with God and those around us.

My first experience with a person experiencing new life came early in my ministry. When I first met Gladys Marker she was confined to bed most of the time, depressed, and living in constant pain. She was elderly and was literally on her last leg. It was the early 1970's and she needed a hip replacement. Because of her age she was afraid she might not survive the surgery. Yet, her surgery was a wonderful success. Afterward, she seemed to breeze through the extensive physical therapy. In no time she was up and walking. However, most surprising was her attitude. She was a new person, hopeful, laughing, planning a new future.

Soon she was out of her house. She learned to drive, bought a car, and was regular in her church attendance. She came to Bible study, she joined a local mission project and soon was heading it up. She took dancing lessons, met a man, and at 77 she married for the first time. I asked her, "Miss Marker, what happened to you?" She told me the night before her surgery she read the Nicodemus story. Then she prayed, "Ok Lord, I'm going into surgery and I'll be new here or in heaven. If I have a choice, I'd like it to be here." She said when she prayed, an amazing peace came over her. She knew the Holy Spirit would lead her where she needed to be. What we were seeing in this blossoming of new life was her response of gratitude to God. Her life was filled with the joy of new health, new relationships, and new faith.

I invite you to follow Nicodemus' example, take your questions in the dark of night to God, and pray for God to make you new each day. \*

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[\*] *Notes:* Information for this sermon came from members of First United Methodist Church of San Diego, who are always my primary source of inspiration, Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 103-123, Patricia Farris, "Late Night Seminar," *The Christian Century*, January 30-February 6, 2002, p. 19, and Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9.

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