Sermon - The Second Sunday in Lent, A  
The Reverend Dale T. Grandfield  
March 6, 2017

Genesis 12:1-4a  
Psalm 121  
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17  
John 3:1-17

Darkness. Everything silent, asleep. A ladder lowers quietly from a window and, driven by love, but nearly held back by fear, she treads carefully down into the street. Incognito. No one saw, and she could see nothing, still she went, daring through the dark, guided by her heart alone. Secret.

So it is that 16th Century Spanish Carmelite mystic St. John of the Cross begins the tale of the Dark Night of the Soul in words more poetic than mine. The feeling of suspense builds as the comfort and security of home fades to black and everything is uncertain: where is the poem’s narrator going to, secretly, by night?

That’s how I imagine the backstory of today’s Gospel reading: darkness. Everything silent, asleep. Jesus flashes through his dreams, his voice echoes, and Nicodemus startles awake with the sudden, insatiable need to get up and go. He creeps out, careful not to wake his wife and family, he tiptoes out into the dark with his cloak to cover his face and walks, a dream sequence, silently frantic, careful not to make a sound, searching for Jesus by night. Where is he? Where is he? How will I ever find him?

The unexpected yearning find Christ, this is the beginning of the spiritual path, the sudden need to go searching, to hold nothing more dearly than the desire itself and to set out without a direction, in the dark, blind, following little more than intuition.

Desire - that is the ground of spirituality, the earth from which it springs: desire. And so Thomas Merton in Thoughts in Solitude writes: “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.”

It’s not unusual for someone to say to me, “You know, Dale, I like the idea of the spirituality, but I just find it hard to believe.” This, of course, is compounded by our cultural context where we are taught that belief is binary: you either do, or you don’t. It’s on, or it’s off, and if it’s off - you’re an “unbeliever”. There is no intermediary shade of belief in this system, no nuance that allows for doubt or questions or mature wrestling. Not even the realistic ebb and flow of the spiritual life and spiritual growth over time.

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1 Juan de la cruz, “Noche oscura del alma” (c. 1577) Spanish: http://elvelerdigital.com/napuntes/yl/ll/nocheoscura.htm
2 Thomas Merton, Thoughts in Solitude, 1958.
The message from cultural Christianity takes its cue from this Gospel passage today: “you must be born again”. And to be born again you must believe. So if you don’t believe… you don’t fit, they say.

But Nicodemos teaches us something about the spiritual path today: he sets out into the night as a skeptic, perhaps even to enlighten Jesus by showing him the error of his theological ways. He is on some sort mission. He asks pertinent questions, and makes reasonable statements. Jesus, as we so often see, speaks in what seem like riddles, and dodges the questions:

It’s as if Jesus is saying: what you’re after, Nicodemos, isn’t as easy to nail-down as you think it is. Life in the kingdom can’t be so easily pinned-down; it isn’t just a set of propositions and affirmations, equations to solve and theorems to prove: it’s only gotten at through transformation, transformation like being born over, metaphorical, so-to-speak, born through water and wind, the chaotic elements of first creation: you can’t reason your way to it, you can’t get there from here, you have to get there from there: you have to wade out into it, in the dark, and let it take you, act upon you, form you… it’s daring, this journey, daring and dangerous, oblique and unknowable - let yourself float, Nicodemos.

And then, amid verses of esoteric word-soup, as if, in a moment of pure clarity Jesus speaks directly to the heart of the phrase that everyone can quote: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”

St. John of the Cross’ poem climaxes saying: “Oh, night that guided me; Oh night more beloved than the dawn; oh night that joined beloved with beloved, beloved and beloved transformed!”

The spiritual path begins with insatiable desire and blossoms in transcendent love. It begins with the willingness to follow, the curiosity to keep open, and to be surprised a path that is dimly lit and poorly planned, that chooses us as much as we choose it. It chooses us because, as much as we may search for God, God is searching still more for us.

As Lent goes on I hope you’ll plan to come sometime when the labyrinth is set up in Tucker Hall. Particularly if you’re finding the spiritual life challenging right now. Journey the labyrinth, bring into it whatever you’re carrying with you, and discover that, serpentine as the path may be, indirect and obscure, it always leads to the exact center. It leads - there’s no need to guide it; it leads and you follow.

The spiritual path begins with desire. May you find your desire again this Lent, may you discover yourself loved, and transformed by love; and may you say with St. John of the Cross: “I stayed and forgot myself, my cheek resting upon the beloved, everything stopped and I lost myself, left behind my caution, lost among the lilies.”

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**Other works consulted**


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3 John 3:16
En una noche oscura,
Con ansias en amores inflamada,
¡oh dichosa ventura!
Sali sin ser notada,
Estando ya mi casa sosegada.
A oscuras y segura
Por la secreta escala, disfrazada,
¡oh dichosa ventura!,
A oscuras y en celada,
Estando ya mi casa sosegada.
En la noche dichosa,
En secreto, que nadie me veía
Ni yo miraba cosa,
Sin otra luz y guía
Sino la que en el corazón ardía.
Aquesta me guiaba
Más cierto que la luz del mediodía,
Adonde me esperaba
Quien yo bien me sabía,
En parte donde nadie parecía.
¡Oh noche, que guiaste;
Oh noche amable más que el alborada;
Oh noche que juntaste
Amado con amada,
Amada, con el Amado transformada!
En mi pecho florido,
Que entero para él solo se guardaba,
Allí quedó dormido,
Y yo le regalaba
Y el ventalle de cedros aire daba.
El aire del almena,
Cuando yo sus cabellos esparcía,
Con su mano serena
En mi cuello hería
Y todos mis sentidos suspendía.
Quedéme y olvidéme,
El rostro recliné sobre el Amado;
Cesó todo y dejéme,
Dejando mi cuidado
Entre las azucenas olvidado.

In a dark night,
Aflame with love’s desire,
What good luck!
I left, without being noticed,
My household already asleep.
In darkness, ensured
By a secret ladder, incognito,
What good luck!
In darkness and completely veiled,
My household already asleep.
Out into the gracious night,
In secret, so no one saw me,
Nor could I see a thing,
Without a single light or guide
Except the one that burned in my heart.
That is what guided me
More directly than noonday light,
To where waited
The one who knew me best,
In a place where no one happened to be.
Oh night, that guided me;
Oh night more lovely than the dawn;
Oh night that united
Beloved with beloved,
Beloved, with the beloved, transformed!
Upon my blooming breast,
Which I had saved entirely for him,
There he stayed asleep,
While I regaled him,
And fanned him with a cedarwood fan.
Air through a parapet,
When I parted his hair,
With his calm hand
Upon my neck, it hurt
Then all those feelings were numbed.
I stayed, and forgot myself,
With my cheek resting on the Beloved;
Everything stopped and I lost myself,
Leaving behind my caution
Lost among the lilies.4 (translation mine)

4 Note: Noche oscura del alma, written sometime between 1577 and 1579 by Juan de la Cruz, a carmelite friar, mystic, and now Doctor of the Church, is without a doubt a poem that uses the image of a forbidden erotic tryst to speak metaphorically about the spiritual journey to mystical union with Christ. It has inspiration in the Song of Songs. Particularly in the last 10 lines, the imagery is obviously pornographic, and that would not have been lost on John’s audience. In the classic sense, the Christian soul takes the part of the female beloved (amada), and Christ the male (amado); this gives a delightful gender-twist to the whole poem, given that the author was himself male. The progress of the soul from purgation (going out into the dark) to illumination (trusting the interior light) to union with the beloved traces the classic ascendency of mystic spirituality. John’s poem is considered one of the great examples of poetry in the Spanish language from the Siglo de Oro (Spanish Baroque), and an exemplar of Christian mysticism.