

*What* happened in that garden? I mean, *what* happened there? It's an utterly obtuse conversation between Jesus and one of the Pharisees and yet – think of what we get from this chapter of John. It leaves me wondering, maybe it does you also, just *what* happened there?

How we encounter Jesus shapes what we see in faith.

How did you first encounter Jesus?

Was it your parents? A Sunday School teacher, perhaps?

Maybe a preacher? Is it now, in this moment?

However you answer those questions, each of us comes to know Jesus Christ somehow.

We can know him abstractly, like an archaeological question, or historically, as a shadow figure recorded by the historian Josephus<sup>1</sup>, or theologically, through the eyes of the Gospel.

The way we encounter Jesus probably does more to shape how we understand him than we know. I don't need to belabor the point that Jesus has been misrepresented plenty, with a lot of words put in his mouth to you all. But I wonder, how did you meet Jesus?

Sometimes, I suspect, the mainline church is a little leery of looking too Jesus-y because we don't want to be tarred with the same brush as the fundamentalists whom we believe have hijacked the Jesus of the Gospel for nefarious purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> **Titus Flavius Josephus**, born **Joseph ben Matityahu** was a first-century Romano-Jewish scholar and historian. His writings provide non-canonical information regarding the person we know as Jesus Christ.

So we solemnly intone, *Christ*, and hope that the theological and soteriological influence subtly shape what people hear from us.

But the truth is I doubt most of us encountered Jesus as *Christ* first. I suspect that most of us encountered Jesus as *story*.

Moreover, it probably wasn't the *first* story that changed us, but rather the aggregate of the stories of Jesus that taught us who he is.

And if we're really lucky, maybe all the stories enabled us to have a relationship with Jesus.

(Parenthetically, I once had a very respected church leader say to a colleague, "I have absolutely no idea what a relationship with Jesus looks like, but I do know that I can have a relationship with Jesus's people, and they share with me the truth of Jesus. That's the relationship I have. So if you don't have that elusive personal relationship with Jesus, don't worry. Keep having a relationship with Jesus's people.)

And perhaps most importantly, whatever our relationship with Jesus, it is the relationship with him that for Christians, defines *truth*, and with that, I come around to a Pharisee named Nicodemus.

Again, what a full chapter of John's Gospel! First there is Nicodemus slinking into the garden under the cover of darkness to meet Jesus. In my mind's eye, it's a garden, I suppose only because Jesus's nighttime encounters tend to happen in gardens. Then there are those cryptic remarks about being born from above – how much time have Christians spent trying to figure that out – and then there is verse 16, *God so loved the world*, and verse 17, which I consider perhaps even more important: *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but so that the world through him might be saved*.

Yes, there's a lot in these verses of John.

How we encounter Jesus here might just shape how we see the Truth.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, I imagine most of us know what that means – modern usage conflates Pharisaism with hypocrisy – that's a wrong use of the term.

Pharisees weren't any more likely to be known for their hypocrisy then than now, I expect. Were there hypocritical Pharisees? I'm sure there were.

But more than that – the Pharisees were the parliamentarians of the ancient Jewish landscape – they knew what needed to be done and how to do it. One scholar I know calls them the pillars of the temple. If anything, he concludes, the church needs *more* Pharisees.

Certainly, there is that notorious passage where Jesus calls them out for tithing mint, dill and cumin while ignoring the weightier measures of the law, but let's be honest, don't we all know some people like that?

We all know some tedious people who are perfectly happy to regale us with opinions on matters about which we care not one bit.

But we also know, I hope, that we need in our own lives and in our lives together, some people who know what needs to be done, and how to do it.

The church does need Pharisees, to be honest.

So this Pharisee went to see Jesus.

This competent, well-versed in scripture, respected believer went to see Jesus and did so under the cover of darkness.

There is not any resolution to Nicodemus's visit to Jesus in real time other than that we encounter him twice more in John's Gospel. First, he reappears advocating for Jesus in

the council – sticking his neck out for Jesus. And then he is one of the men who claims the body after the execution.

It's a special kind of friend that will claim your body, you know?

So whatever Nicodemus encountered in that garden, it stuck.

I don't know what he encountered there. But whatever it was, it was profound.

Welsh poet Henry Vaughan suggests it is better to be in the darkness with Jesus than in the light – he writes,

“Were all my loud, evil days/  
calm and unhaunted as is thy dark tent,  
whose peace but by some angels wing or voice/  
is seldom rent;/ Then I in heaven all the long year/  
would keep, and never wander here.”<sup>2</sup>”

It is such a temptation to want to pull away to the garden and stay there, isn't it?

Who wouldn't rather withdraw to a safe place, alone with Jesus and hear words of comfort and truth?

But that is not what the church is for. That is not what Jesus's followers are called to do.

And so, as far as we can tell, Nicodemus went back to his life.

And so must we.

Jesus went on preaching – the next thing we read is of his baptism – as sure a sign of God's immersion into the complexities, messiness, difficulty, joy, and laughter of life as we can find.

Straight from the nighttime visit with Nicodemus, Jesus is plunged into the roiling, churning waters of the Jordan with a massive mess of sinful, needy people.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Night* by Henry Vaughan in *Divine Inspirations: the Life of Jesus in World Poetry*. Atwan, Dardess and Rosenthal, eds. (New Your: Oxford University Press, 1998) p188

It would be tempting to race right past this interlude to the baptism of Jesus and it's certainly appealing to – Jesus is cryptic, and we have no idea what happened between Jesus and Nicodemus.

But I think we miss something if we do – we miss the chance to ask questions of ourselves. You see, I suspect Nicodemus is a microcosm of the life of faith.

Most of us, I expect, would like a great deal more clarity about the issues of life. I expect that we'd love to have, as the Pharisees could provide, a roadmap of the life of faith.

It'd be convenient, wouldn't it?

It'd save us a lot of questions and perplexity – if it were just always clear, wouldn't it?

Think of the current life of a Christian and all the things we have to make our best guesses at, and Nicodemus really does seem like he's just like you and me.

I could be a Pharisee named Baron very easily.

Drew would make a great Pharisee, I'm sure.

You all would probably make great Pharisees, we could have Pharisees named... well, maybe I won't name names.

But aren't we occasionally tempted to come at faith in Jesus under the cover of darkness?

Isn't it occasionally easier to take it as an academic exercise?

Maybe you're intrigued by Jesus, but this commitment thing is going to be a challenge?

It's easy to look at Nicodemus and see a mirror.

We could do a lot less seeking if it were just laid out.

I think a lot of us are seeking – and I think we are seeking something more profound than what we can find when the world is laid out without the possibility of surprises and twists

and turns. Because when we don't know what is next, the possibility remains that we can find so much more than we thought we were seeking.

If, at the end of your seeking, all you have found is yourself, then you haven't really found anything more than what you started with. But if you found transcendence, if you found something greater than yourself, then perhaps the searching was worth it.

I don't know what Nicodemus found, I do know that two times, later in John, we find Nicodemus, and I think he found more than himself. In Jesus, Nicodemus found the transcendent holy otherness of God in all the mystery of incarnation.

Henry Vaughan concludes his poem,

“There is in God (some say)/a deep, but dazzling darkness; as men here/say it is late and dusky, because they/see not all clear;/ O for that night, where I in him/might live, invisible and dim.”<sup>3</sup>

How do you encounter Jesus?

Is it in stories?

Or perhaps, in people?

When you encounter him, what will you do?

Or perhaps, what will you be?

Can we be born again, from above?

Or maybe can we believe that indeed, through him, the whole world is saved?

We could stay in the garden and ponder these questions, I suppose.

Under the cover of darkness Nicodemus opened the door to a world where all of the certainty of practice and protocol came face to face with creative, sacred messiness of the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

incarnation. I can only imagine what it took to make that walk under the cover of darkness. And surely he must have wanted to stay there with Jesus, in the cover of nighttime conversation.

And surely we might want to linger there, for a while, in the soft sureness of the presence of Jesus.

We could do it. I suppose we could stay huddled in the garden – but Jesus will have moved on. Somewhere the roiling, churning, massive mess of humanity needs him. That is where we will find him.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.