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Scripture: John 3, Nicodemus and Jesus

Don't you love the fall season? You can open your windows at home and let in some crisp, fresh air. Thanksgiving is in the fall when you take some time to remember with gratitude all that God has provided. Family, friends and turkey with cranberry sauce! Fall to me represents all things, pumpkin. I love pumpkin pie but it doesn't stop there. Starbucks offers its pumpkin spiced latte, but there is also, pumpkin butter, pumpkin pop tarts, pumpkin cheerios, pumpkin wine and of course, pumpkin scented candles. At this time of the year, many of the small communities have their Fall Fairs. In fact, I think Ilderton is hosting their fall fair this very weekend. After church call someone you know in Ilderton and check out their fair. For me fall means Football and the fact that Christmas is just around the corner. But if I were to ask you the one thing that most represents fall in southern Ontario, what would you say? I think most of us would respond the same way, won't we? The Trees, the leaves changing colour.

I thought it was only appropriate to reference trees since they are a bit of our metaphor for this message series we are in called, "Foundations".

A long time ago, I sat in the "Nat Sci" building at Western University right here in London and I struggled my way through first year Biology. In the Botany unit we learned all about the Krebs Cycle and Photosynthesis. Anyone ever study the Krebs Cycle and Photosynthesis? It can be confusing but also fascinating. Photosynthesis in its very simplest form is the process by which plants, trees and other organisms convert light energy from the sun into chemical energy which serves as its food and fuel. When we get hungry we can just go to the fridge for a quick bite. But for trees it is a bit different. They need water, sunlight and soil to grow but they get

their food by making it themselves. By using the energy of sunlight, they convert carbon dioxide and water into carbohydrates and oxygen. Which of course is a benefit for us, as we need oxygen to survive. I know what you are thinking, thank you Bill Nye the science guy for this fascinating lesson. But as a bonus since you paid such close attention, let me go a step further, in the fall, because of the shorten periods of sunlight in the day and the drop in temperature, the leaves stop their food-making process. The chlorophyll that gives leaves their normal green colour disappears, and they turn a vast array of wonderful, vibrant colours, on their way to dying. Falling to the ground. They go out in a blaze of glory, literally.

It is interesting that *Photosynthesis* comes from two Greek words that mean "light" and "putting together".

Light, putting together. Hold that thought.

As I mentioned earlier, we are in a message series, called **Foundations. Why We Believe What We Believe.** It is a series about those core pillars of our faith that serve as a solid foundation on which to build our lives. Throughout the series, as I said, we have been using the imagery of a tree and its root system to represent a solid foundation. The idea is that for a tree to grow and flourish, it must have a deep root system as its anchor, just as we must have a solid foundation for our lives to have purpose and meaning. Three weeks ago, I launched this series, looking at the story of creation. When God made humanity, it was good and his intention for us right from the beginning was to rule over creation and be his image bearer to the world. It is a foundational pillar of what we believe as Christians.

Unfortunately, not too long into the story, Adam and Eve chose to exert their own will instead of listening to God and sin entered the world. Sin separates us from God. That is another foundational pillar in which we believe. But scripture tells us that God went to work almost immediately behind the scenes to launch a rescue operation for us. He would provide someone, a “suffering servant”, a substitution who would take the punishment that we deserve for our rebellion and by doing so, restore our relationship back to God. This is a foundational pillar of what we believe as Christians.

Last week, we looked at the passage in Luke 4, when Jesus in the synagogue in his hometown, reveals that he is the Messiah, he is that “suffering servant”. He is the Saviour for not only the Jewish people but for all of humanity. That is another foundation belief we have as Christians. We are saved through Jesus.

Today we come to a passage that may contain the most familiar verse in all of scripture. Does anyone know what it is?

John 3:16

“For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

As I have shared with you before, this is the first verse I ever memorized from the bible. I must have been 5-6 years old in a Sunday school class at Calvary Baptist Church in Guelph. You can tell the verses I put to memory in my early years because they are all in the King James translation because that is all we had back then. Well, except for the early Greek and Hebrew manuscripts but they were a tad advanced for me.

John 3:16 it a wonderful verse about the hope that we have through Jesus due to God’s great love for us, but like so many passages that we put to memory, when we focus just on one verse, we can miss the incredible story that is going on around it. Do you understand what I mean?

Jeremiah 29:11

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Philippians 4:13

I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Psalms 23:4

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me

These are powerful truths but they only truly come alive when we understand the context around them and that is also true of John 3:16. Do you know the context of this verse?

In the first two chapters of the gospel of John, Jesus has begun his public ministry. He has done some teaching in the public square, he has performed some miracles. In John 2, Jesus even runs afoul of the Jewish leaders when he clears the temple. Do you remember the story? Jesus is angry that the temple, his Father’s house has become a marketplace so he overturns the tables and drives the vendors away and then we come to John 3 and Jesus has an encounter with a man named Nicodemus. Let me pick up the story in,

John 3:1

There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee.

We learn some important things about Nicodemus in this first verse. His name, Nicodemus, in the Greek means “victory of the people”. It comes from the same root as the sports apparel giant Nike, which means “victory”. Nicodemus was a Jewish male and a member of the higher social strata of the Jewish society. He was also a Rabbi which meant in this culture, he was on the upper tier of those who were educated. As a Pharisee, he was seen as piously righteous and upright according to the standards of the day and was responsible for upholding the law, God’s commands from the Old Testament scriptures. He had a certain amount of wealth and prestige and status and he obviously had a reputation in his community as Jesus refers to him

as the teacher of Israel a little later in the text. All in all, Nicodemus was locked into the status quo of the Jerusalem mainstream society. He seemed to have it all, reputation, education, prestige, a little power, a little wealth, not unlike many of you. Working an honest living, trying to do what is right, raising a family. You have some education and some material resources. Life seems good. It is comfortable. But something happens to Nicodemus that seems to launch him on a bit of a personal journey of discovery. Does anyone know what it was?

Jesus comes along. Jesus enters his world. Nicodemus encounters Jesus. Do you remember the first time you met Jesus? Maybe it was through a family member or a friend. Perhaps at a Christian movie or through some literature like the bible or on television or social media. Or maybe someone invited you to go to a church and you got introduced to Jesus for the first time. What impact did that have on you?

I grew up going to church and had this familiarity with Jesus that honestly, I probably took for granted. I was kind of living in the shadow of my parent's faith. It wasn't until I was in my later teens, after a bit of teenage angst and rebellion that I really met Jesus in a meaningful way. Do you know what it caused me to do? I wanted to know him more. To get to know him better. Isn't that what happens naturally when you meet someone that interests you? You want to get to know them in a deeper way. Some of you are sitting beside someone today that you met, they interested you and caused you to want to get to know them more and you ended up marrying them. How did you get to know them better? You courted them, didn't you? You dated and spent time with one another. You fell in love and the rest is history right? Most of you have had this experience with another person and you have had the experience with Jesus. That is what happens to Nicodemus as well.

His life, touched by some sort of connection to this traveling rabbi and whether it was simple curiosity or a "God moment", Nicodemus wanted to meet Jesus face to face. He desired to have a "one on one" with him. An opportunity to learn more about Jesus, and the things he was teaching.

John 3:2

After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus.

Nicodemus' desire to meet with Jesus was perhaps due to his scholarly bent. He has questions for him. He was searching for something that he thought Jesus had to offer. On the outside, Nicodemus seemed to have it all. He was a learned teacher and intellect. For all we know, he probably had a wife, two kids, a nice car, (or horse and chariot), a split level home in a gated community. He had money, status, prestige but he was still searching, for something and...he believed Jesus had the answers.

What is the first thing you noticed about the meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus? It occurred *After dark*. Isn't that an interesting detail that the author decides to mention? *After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus*. Now, maybe we shouldn't read too much into this. The evening could have been the most convenient time that fit both of their schedules. Nicodemus was occupied teaching all day so that by the time he got home, eats dinner and takes his children to their Greco Roman Wrestling classes, the night time worked the best for him. Jesus with his thriving outreach ministry, the evening was maybe the best time to kick back a little, relax and engage in a little heart to heart. Maybe.

Nicodemus meets with Jesus in darkness. What does darkness or the night represent in the bible? Evil. Sin. Deception. Hiddenness. Cover. A quick glance through the book of John and you will see that the author uses this metaphor of dark and light often.

John 8:12

Jesus spoke to the people once more and said, "I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life."

Jesus is the light. Darkness is that which opposes him such as sin, hiddenness, cover and being lost. I don't think the author's reference to Nicodemus coming *After dark* to meet Jesus is a trivial detail in the text. I think it is an important point.

What does darkness represent to you? You have all seen those movies of the person arriving home to a darkened house. They step through the front door, and you know what is awaiting them in the shadows. They hear a strange sound and start walking through the house with a broomstick in their hand and you are thinking, *turn on the lights, turn on the lights! Why don't they ever turn on the lights?!* But they don't. The music intensifies and then, bam.

Darkness represents fear to us, doesn't it? That is why we put nightlights in the hallway for our children. The night time can be scary. But darkness also offers cover to do those things that maybe you would never do in the light of day. Have you ever done something mischievous? You usually look for some cover when you are up to some mischief, am I right?

Since this season of fall also represents the time for Hallowe'en, I can share this story. The night before Hallowe'en in Kitchener- Waterloo when I was growing up was referred to as "Devil's Night". I don't know if that is still a thing. It was a rather appropriate name given the fact that it was a time when, usually teenagers, would go out under the cover of darkness and create some havoc. Cause a little mischief. At the risk of shattering the stellar image you have of me, I participated in this activity, the night of mischief one time, when I was around 14. Myself and some friends decided that we were going to throw a few eggs at some houses around my buddy's neighbourhood. Now we had no reason, no motivation, it was just a chance to do silly things that teenage boys sometimes do.

When darkness fell, we collected our ammunition, the eggs in a paper bag and off we went. Finding those strategic locations behind trees and bushes, we launched our attack. Egg after egg bounced off brick and windows and patios. At one home, a lady actually came racing out the front door and chased us. No problem, we scattered and got away. We met back up a little later and walked to my buddy's house. As we were sitting in his open, lit garage, sharing a laugh about the events of the night, the lady that chased us walked up the driveway. She knocked on the door in the garage leading to the house, my buddy's dad came to the door.

She told him what we had done. There was no way to deny it now. In the darkness, we were covered but in the light of the garage, our guilt was revealed. Those now egg stained bags that once held our artillery were sitting by our sides. We were busted. This night before Hallowe'en mischief making became a one and done experience for me. My parents saw to that.

Why did Nicodemus wait until darkness to meet with Jesus? Perhaps it was because he had so much invested in his life and his career that a public meeting with Jesus, out in the open could have led to ridicule by those in his circles of influence or worse, loss of his job or his reputation. Remember, most Pharisees of which Nicodemus was one, were intensely jealous of Jesus because they thought that he undermined their authority and challenged their views. Which he did! But Nicodemus, he was different. He was searching. He needed to meet Jesus, to dialogue with him but it needed to be under the cover of darkness. To protect himself but it also served as a metaphor for his spiritual condition, He is still in the dark. He is still lost.

Notice how their dialogue begins as John 3:2 continues,

John 3:2

After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. "Rabbi," he said, "we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you."

Nicodemus starts it out with a compliment, a little ice breaker...

"Rabbi, we know you are sent from God, the way that you live, teach and perform miracles reveal that God is with you."

How would you respond if someone said something as kind as that to you? *I see the evidence of God in your life.* We would probably say, *Wow, thanks. That is nice of you to say.* Or, perhaps as good Canadians we probably would probably deflect, *God in me, ah shucks, I see God in you.*

I love the way that Jesus responds. He gets right to the point.

John 3:3

Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God."

Where did that come from?! No exchange of pleasantries, no surface small talk, Jesus gets right to the heart of the matter. He knew who he was meeting with. He knew Nicodemus and the baggage of legalism and head knowledge that he brought with him. Nicodemus had a lot of intellect. As a Pharisee, he knew the scriptures by heart, backwards and forwards. He knew all the Jewish laws. But, what he was lacking was a heart knowledge, a heart connect with Jesus. Three times in his dialogue with Jesus in this text, Nicodemus asks questions that go deeper and deeper in spiritual truth and permit Jesus to go into more detail about what it means to have a relationship with him and be part of the Kingdom of God. Jesus doesn't just answer his questions, he invites Nicodemus to probe deeper because he is more interested in having a relationship with him than he is about growing his intellect. Listen to their exchange,

John 3:4

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Nicodemus. "How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?"

John 3:5

Jesus replied,

John 3:9

"How are these things possible?" Nicodemus asked.

John 3:10

Jesus replied,

Back and forth, this conversation probably went on for hours. At one point Jesus even references Moses because he knew that would have been a valuable link for Nicodemus. As a Pharisee, he would have known the Old Testament scriptures and Israelite history in great detail. It is what he lived out every day in his life, adherence to the Law. But then Jesus gets to the crux of the matter. The whole conversation had been building to this point and Jesus kind of lays it all on the line. What he is about, his motivation and purpose with these words in John 3:16.

John 3:16

"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

Let that sink in.

There is no recorded response of Nicodemus to these words but notice that Jesus continues. Listen to what he says in,

John 3:17-21

God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.¹⁸ "There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son."¹⁹ And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil.²⁰ All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed.²¹ But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants."

Notice that Jesus uses these metaphors of dark and light. Light represents everything about God and darkness represents everything that is contrary to God. It is like Jesus is saying, *Nicodemus, you have come to me in darkness and that is the way you are living, come to light, come to me, put your trust in me, you don't have to stay hidden any longer.* Then we are left hanging because the passage takes a little different direction. It is like a cliff hanger. We want to know what becomes of Nicodemus. Well, he does appear on two other occasions in the gospel of John. Watch what unfolds in his journey with Jesus.

In John 7, Jesus' preaching, teaching and miracles have so incensed the Pharisees that they convene a meeting to try and get him arrested. In the midst of a very heated discussion about Jesus, a lone voice comes to his defense. Do you know who it is? It's Nicodemus. Let me remind you of what Jesus said in,

John 3:21

But those who do what is right come to the light.

Watch how Nicodemus begins to come to the light. The last time we saw him, he was with Jesus in this sort of late night, clandestine, back room meeting. But now he is beginning to pull the cover back. He is starting to come into the light. In a meeting with his Pharisaical Brethren, he is the lone voice that comes to Jesus' defense.

John 7:50-51

Then Nicodemus, the leader who had met with Jesus earlier, spoke up. "Is it legal to convict a man before he is given a hearing?" he asked.

Nicodemus takes a stand that runs counter to the thoughts and opinions of a group in which he is a member in good standing. He speaks up from his heart based on his growing experience of who Jesus is. Something is going on here. Have you ever had to do that, be the lone voice that speaks up about something? Have you ever had such a conviction that you took a stand for something, even when it meant going against what your friends, family, co-workers or classmates thought? That is tough.

The fall usually represents the end of wedding season for me. I officiate at a lot of weddings each year. I have one more in November that I am done until the New Year. I love the interaction with the couples in pre-marriage counselling and then it culminates with a beautiful wedding ceremony. But, there has been the very rare time, when after getting to know the couple and seeing their dynamics, I have had to say to them, *I don't think this is going to work. I have some deep concerns for the success of your marriage.* Those are tough words to speak, especially if the hall has been booked, the dress purchased and guests invited and I am the only one that sees it. The lone dissenting voice.

Most of the Pharisees that surround Nicodemus had grown to hate Jesus and they wanted to kill him. Nicodemus demonstrates his first signs of public allegiance with Christ by speaking up for Him in this meeting. His statement was bold and his colleagues began to get suspicious of Nicodemus. Is he beginning to turn to Jesus? And that's it. The story moves in another direction. Another cliff

hanger and we are left to wonder, *what happens to Nicodemus?* Oh, he appears one more time in the gospel of John, in chapter 19. By now, Jesus has been tried, convicted and crucified by the Jewish Religious leaders. His followers are in disarray. You can imagine, they are not sure what to do next. Jesus' dead body was taken down from the cross and needs to have a proper burial. Remember what Jesus said in,

John 3:21

But those who do what is right come to the light.

Watch how Nicodemus now steps right into the light.

John 19:38-39 says that after Jesus death,

Joseph of Arimathea, who had been a secret disciple of Jesus (because he feared the Jewish leaders), asked Pilate for permission to take down Jesus' body. When Pilate gave permission, Joseph came and took the body away. With him came Nicodemus,

Did you catch the wonderful significance in this passage? Nicodemus, who was once afraid to make his allegiance to Jesus known because of his position in the Jewish community, who first came to Jesus under cover of darkness, risks everything now. All that he used to deem as important, his status, position, prestige and power he puts to the side as he joins with Joseph to claim Jesus body after his crucifixion and provide for his burial. Nicodemus receives Jesus' dead body, isn't that powerful? It is his coming to the light moment. He goes public with his faith. He takes a stand which reveals where his allegiance now lies. He accepts Jesus' death for himself! We don't know the rest of his story, Nicodemus is not mentioned again in scripture, but his life serves as a lesson and challenge for all of us.

What does the story of Nicodemus teach us? He was one man, but in a sense, he represents us all, doesn't he? Do you remember what his name means? "*Victory of the people*". His interactions with Jesus represent a model of spiritual conversion, moving from darkness to light. Nicodemus stands as a model of a life impacted by Christ and in a sense, he is a mirror for us to see ourselves, victory of the people, through Jesus. We are all Nicodemus.

Foundations
Why We Believe What We Believe.

John 3 ~ Nicodemus and Jesus

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Talk a moment in your group to discuss what you love about the fall season. Share some memories or favourite fall activities.
2. Share some of your favourite bible verses with one another. Why are they so meaningful to you? Do you know the context in which they are found in the bible? How has that helped to magnify the meaning of the verse to you?
3. Do you remember the very first encounter you had with Jesus? Describe it to your group. Would you say that you first met Jesus, “After dark”? What constituted the darkness in your life at that time?
4. Looking back, can you see your spiritual journey as a process of moving from darkness to light? Share some of the events or situations that prompted you to move closer and closer to the light of Jesus.
5. Have you ever had to take a stand or be the lone voice that speaks into a situation? Describe what happened as a result.
6. Are there times in your spiritual life that you are still drawn to darkness, to covering something up? What is it that hinders you from bringing that into the light of Jesus?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray specifically that God will help each one of you to bring those things in your life that you are hiding in the dark and reveal and expose them to the light of Jesus.

Many of us have had encounters with Jesus, God moments, which have led to our conversion stories, moving from darkness to light. For some of us, it was in stages and for others, it was like flinging the covers off. Do you remember that story about photosynthesis I told you earlier? Were you wondering how I could weave that one in? Do you remember what photosynthesis means? Those two Greek words? *Light, putting together*. A tree needs the light, sunlight, to live. It ingests it and turns it into food and fuel, to do what it was made to do, give off oxygen for those around it to breathe. *Light, putting it together for life*.

We, humanity can't live in the dark. We cannot thrive undercover. As those created in the image of God, we were meant to take in his light, the Holy Spirit puts it together in us and then radiates His life and light to all the world. Do you understand that? Light putting together for life.

Where does this message meet you today? The story of Nicodemus? Where are you on that journey from darkness to light? Have you stepped into the light that is, Jesus? Have you turned over everything to him or are you still undercover? Still hiding in the darkness? Or maybe you are on the journey but part of you is still hiding in the shadows. You are still holding something back, covering up some sin or behavior because of guilt or shame.

Come to the light. Surrender it all to him, today. It is in the light of Jesus where life, true life is possible.

This is foundation pillar of what we believe. As we conclude today, I want you to know this,

John 3:16

“For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

Amen? Amen.

Points to Ponder