

Last Wednesday at our Lenten worship, and I shared part of an article I recently read about how to complain to God in prayer. We are often told that we shouldn't complain, especially to God, but if Job can complain, and the psalmists can complain, and their complaints can become part of our holy scripture, then it follows that we, too, have permission to complain to God, who, after all, knows what we want to complain about already. The same goes for doubt and the questions that come with doubt. Sometimes I hear people talk about doubt as if it is the opposite of faith, as if we are failing to trust God if we dare to ask questions. But how can we look at the injustice, the cruelty, the chaos of this world and *not* ask questions of our God who is supposed to be good, loving, merciful, and just. Now, the answer is often that God gave us a very good creation and we human beings messed it up, but still, asking the question isn't a sign that we lack faith; asking the question is a sign that we are in relationship with God.

Which is why I wonder that Nicodemus is so often criticized for his part in John's gospel. It is possible the John intends to portray Nicodemus in a negative light, literally. He comes to see Jesus at night, presumably under the cover of darkness, a not so subtle detail that invites us to compare and contrast him with other major characters in John's gospel, like the woman at the well who encounters Jesus in the brightest hour of midday. John likes that imagery of darkness and light, giving us no birth narrative to read at Christmas, only his poetic description of the incarnation: *In him was life; and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness; and the darkness did not overcome it.* So it's possible John wants us to see it as a bad sign that Nicodemus visits Jesus in the dark; but we don't really know why he went at night.

Maybe Nicodemus was an emissary from the Pharisees. Maybe they *all* wanted to learn more about what Jesus had to say but, as religious experts themselves, they were afraid of approaching Jesus publicly and showing the crowds that there were things they didn't already know. Perhaps Nicodemus drew the short straw and went to Jesus on their behalf. Or maybe Nicodemus *was* the rebel of the group, the only one who wanted to learn more about and from Jesus, but knew he'd be ostracized if the other Pharisees found out. Or maybe Jesus had these secretive conversations with several of the Pharisees, but John only wrote down this one. Whatever the circumstances were that brought Nicodemus to Jesus, even if it was in the dark of night, let's not miss the fact that he was there.

*We know that you are a teacher who has come from God, because no one can do the signs you do apart from God,* Nicodemus says. On the surface, that simply seems like a statement of

fact. But the unspoken question Nicodemus implies is *But how can you be both from God and always challenging our understanding of God?* There would have been no need for Nicodemus, on his own or as a representative of the Pharisees, to question Jesus privately at night if there was no conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees during the day. Jesus tries to explain spiritual truths to Nicodemus, who—at least at this point—does not seem to understand. But that confusion is deeply rooted in his struggle to reconcile what he—a religious expert—already believes about God with the obvious work of God being done by Jesus, who does *not* conform to his preconceived ideas. Don't be too hard on Nicodemus; we, too, can be shocked to see God at work outside of our expectations, working with and through people with whom we disagree and in circumstances that we avoid or disapprove. *For God so loved the world... not for God so loved us and everyone who agrees with us, who looks and thinks and acts like us...* God so loving *The World* means we're going to see God in a lot of people and places we've been taught not to expect.

Nicodemus' story was written down, but he's hardly the only person to go to Jesus with questions during the dark night of the soul. Live this life long enough and we're likely to find ourselves struggling through experiences that bump up against our understanding of who God is and what God does. *I thought I understood where I was supposed to be going, God; what is this roadblock doing here? I thought you were supposed to be my help and my strength; why does it feel like I can't go on? How could this happen; what am I supposed to do now?* These are not the kinds of questions that have easy answers, and they are not the kinds of questions asked by the faithless or the faltering. These are the questions of people who trust that God is listening, or at the very least hope that God is listening; and isn't that all the faith that we need?

If God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, he probably didn't send us, either. John didn't tell us Nicodemus' story so we could congratulate ourselves on how much better we understand spiritual things than he did. Asking Jesus, *How can these things be?* doesn't make Nicodemus a doubter or a doofus; it makes him a person of faith trying to dig deeper and learn more. And although Nicodemus sort of disappears at this point in the story—there really is no end to this scene of John's gospel—he isn't gone for good. When the plot to kill Jesus starts gaining momentum, Nicodemus speaks out on Jesus' behalf. And after Jesus is crucified, Nicodemus shows up with a hundred pounds of oils and spices to anoint his body for burial. He got there in the end, all from beginning with the questions that we can only bear to ask in the darkest night. So whatever your question, go ahead and ask; God is listening.