

Sermon for Lent Mid-week #3

Date: March 20, 2019

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Epistle Reading: Romans 5:1-11

Gospel Reading: John 3:1-21

Sermon Title: Nicodemus, the Silent Believer

Introit: Psalm 25:1-10; Antiphon: Psalm 25:22

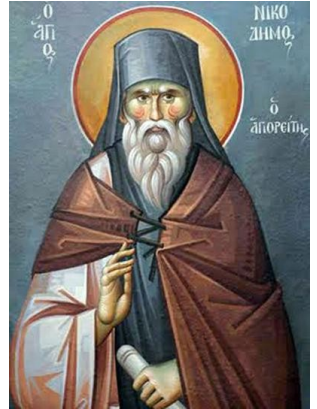
Hymns:

LSB 439 – O Dearest Jesus, What Law Hast Thou Broken (v4-6)

LSB 611 – Chief of Sinners Though I Be
Called to Remember (*Tune 637*)

LSB 422 – On My Heart Imprint your Image

LSB 430 – My Song Is Love Unknown (v.1,2,4,7)



Liturgy:

Divine Service: Special



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Grace to you in Jesus' name. Amen.

While thinking about the people involved in Jesus' last week of ministry one person that comes to mind is Nicodemus. I sometimes wonder if Nicodemus ever felt any remorse for not doing more to prevent Jesus' suffering and death. Did he ever ask himself if he could have done something differently to help Jesus?

I wonder how many of you remember Nicodemus. He is sometimes called the "Nighttime Disciple" because the first time he came to visit Jesus it was late at night. Today we're not calling him the Nighttime Disciple, but we are going to call him the Silent Believer. It might not be appropriate to call Nicodemus a disciple when he first came to talk to Jesus. He had seen and heard Jesus publicly. He had heard about, and perhaps seen, the miracles. He also knew his Scriptures, he knew how to recognize the Messiah, and that's what got his mind reeling. That is what peaked his curiosity and prompted him to sneak out in the night to find and talk to Jesus secretly, quietly, silently. Hence the name Silent Believer.



Nicodemus knew Jesus' authority came from God.¹ Still he had questions that he needed answered. Questions that he wanted to ask Jesus alone, away from the crowds and all the commotion. You see Nicodemus was considered one of the great teachers of his day. He had a reputation for being wise and well studied in the Holy Scriptures. It might have been awkward to be seen asking Jesus questions rather than teaching Jesus answers. He wanted to speak with Jesus, teacher to teacher. He a teacher among the Jewish people, and Jesus a teacher with signs from Heaven. Nicodemus wondered, and hoped to learn more, about whether Jesus was the Messiah of God.

So, he came in the night to talk to Jesus. Not only to avoid the crowds of people, but the eyes of the other leaders of Israel too. The Sanhedrin, the ruling council, the Temple authority, of which he was a part, would not have appreciated hearing that Nicodemus had gone to talk to the one man they were trying most desperately to shut up and shut down. They saw Jesus as a threat to their

¹ John 3:2

job security and comfortable life. They hated Jesus for the way He refused to obey the rules and regulations they had added to God’s Law. Further more they were increasingly jealous of the ever growing following that Jesus had. If they knew that Nicodemus had gone to talk to Jesus, they would have likely turned on him as well, and possibly even removed him from his seat on the powerful Sanhedrin council. Nicodemus wouldn’t want to jeopardize his good standing with them and the people.

So Nicodemus went to Jesus at night, and that night Nicodemus’ life was changed forever. Jesus taught Nicodemus things about the kingdom of God and how he needed to be reborn to a new life through the Holy Spirit. He taught Nicodemus that the Messiah did not come to condemn the world,² but rather God loved the world so much that He sent the Messiah, His only Son, as payment for all the world’s sin, and whoever believes in Him will not perish in an eternal death, but have everlasting life.³

Nicodemus didn’t understand everything Jesus taught him that night, but the seeds of change – the seeds of faith – had been planted. He would ponder and come to fully believe the Messiah had come and His name is Jesus. That night however, he kept silent about his visit and kept his ever growing faith in Jesus to himself. He didn’t let on, for some time, that he had talked to Jesus personally. On the outside he was quiet, silent, but on the inside his soul was crying out for more.

As time progressed the members of the Temple Authority, the Sanhedrin, grew more and more hostile toward Jesus. They began to oppose him openly, even challenge Him publicly. In their meetings they plotted ways to destroy Jesus. Through all of this Nicodemus remained the silent believer.



In time the conflict between Jesus as the Temple Authority came to a head. They schemed and plotted ways to have Jesus arrested and condemned. They sent out a contingent to get Him, but they returned empty handed. When the counsel asked why they failed, they answered, “No one has ever spoke the way

2 John 3:17

3 John 3:16

this man does.⁴” Certainly Nicodemus knew exactly what they meant. He understood what they encountered when they heard Jesus teach. Yet, he remained silent.

Most of the others on the counsel railed against Jesus. They exclaimed, “Nobody who is anybody believes in him. The rulers don’t. The Pharisees don’t. And the mob knows nothing of the Law, but is cursed.⁵” It was there, at that point, that Nicodemus could no longer remain completely silent. He was a member of the Sanhedrin and a Pharisee, an expert in the Law of God. He was compelled to point out their hypocrisy. They themselves ignored and violated the Law in the scheming against Jesus and their plotting for His death. Nicodemus was compelled to speak, his conscience would no longer allow him to sit silently.

He gained the floor of the counsel and spoke, “Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?⁶” It was a good legal question but it fell far short of defending Jesus and confessing his faith.

The council ignored the legal challenge. Instead they ridiculed Nicodemus, wondering if he too was deceived by the Galilean.⁷ The meeting no doubt left Nicodemus with a heavy and sad heart. He must have wondered if anyone had guessed his real feelings about Jesus. Certainly some wondered, but it was not because he clearly and boldly confessed his faith. He was still the silent believer.

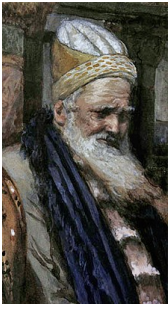
He pondered his dilemma. He had tried to help Jesus. He had faced his irrational peers. Still, he had failed to force the point. He failed to expose their madness, failed to confess Jesus as the Messiah of God. He needed more understanding and more strength. Nicodemus was on the road to a bold and open faith in Jesus, but he had a long way to go. For the time being, probably judging that to say anything more would be fruitless, and perhaps dangerous, he remained silent.

4 John 7:46

5 John 7:49

6 John 7:50-51

7 John 7:52



Six months later, it was the truly corrupt high priest Caiaphas who convinced the whole Sanhedrin that Jesus must die.⁸ As the judgment was issued possibly only Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea did not consent. They also did not strenuously object. It was too late and impossible to stop the brewing storm. They kept silent.

Then it happened. Late during the night, illegally, during the Passover celebration, the council was summoned to convene. Jesus had been captured, and He was to be put on trial for His life. Everything was corrupt about this trial. There were false witnesses who had been called so quickly they could get their stories straight.⁹ The entire trial was an obvious display of contempt for the Law. Even more was Caiaphas' utter hatred for Jesus. All of it was horribly wrong, all of it was a sham and everyone there knew it, though most didn't care. Their power and position were at stake. Nicodemus was there. He saw all of this. He the most respected teacher of Israel, and a member of the great Sanhedrin, still said nothing to stop or slow this relentless tide of injustice.



It was at Calvary, at the cross, after Jesus' torture, suffering and death, that Nicodemus finally found the strength to act. Nicodemus had watched Jesus die horribly, probably feeling some guilt, feeling that he had let this happen. He could have spoken, he could have said or done something to stop this travesty. The death of an innocent man sent from God. Surly he marveled to himself how passively Jesus accepted His death sentence. He heard Jesus cry out from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."¹⁰ That word of forgiveness had to mean a lot in Nicodemus' ears most of all. In Nicodemus' mind no one needed forgiveness more than he.



It was there that he determined not to hide his faith any longer. Although it was terribly late, maybe too late he no

8 John 11:49-50

9 Mark 14:56-59

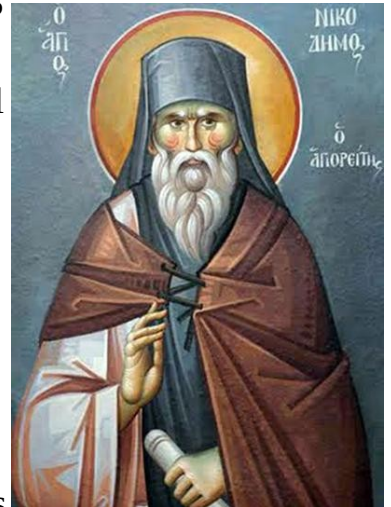
10 Luke 23:34

doubt thought, he would show that Jesus did not die in vain. He would help bury him. He would publicly confess his allegiance to Jesus and his teachings. Let the rest of the council do their worst. Nicodemus' place was now with Jesus, even a dead Jesus. Nicodemus no doubt faced the wrath of the council, but he did not need them anymore. He did not need the power, he did not need to position, he did not need the prestige. He had Christ.

The days ahead brought untold joy to Nicodemus. The man he had buried rose from the dead and appeared alive. Jesus' death was not in vain. In death, Jesus won forgiveness of sins, and eternal life, for Nicodemus and all sinners, including me and you. In time Nicodemus would learn what you and I know, Jesus did not die because Nicodemus failed to speak or act. He died because He had a mission to save the world. Jesus had planned to die, before the creation of the world,¹¹ for all sin. Now that Jesus was alive again, how could Nicodemus help but speak?

Now I ask: Are there any Nicodemus-es here today? Do you sometimes stay silent when you should be telling the truth of Christ Jesus? Do you sometimes feel intimidated by bold and threatening unbelievers, or those who though they call themselves Christian live a life showing their lack of, or contempt for, faith? Do you struggle to express and confess your faith holding back because of weakness? First do not fear, all believers feel such things.

Still I urge you to learn from Nicodemus' example. Remember Jesus on the cross. Remember Him in the grave. Then remember Him alive. Remember your sins are forgiven and forgotten. Remember your salvation is won. There in that power and promise of God, speak up and tell the world about Him and all He has done. If you have hesitated before, don't hesitate any longer. Take the lead to honor Christ. Trust in Him and be bold to speak of the crucified Savior who came for all of us. Amen.



¹¹ Ephesians 1:4