

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
Dr. Jonathan Dent
Nighttime Conversations with Jesus

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2nd Sunday after Lent

Some of us take the dying or last moments of everyday and consider the state of life and the world. We think about the news, about our families, about our own bodies, aches and pains and international problems, about why things happen the way they do. Of course, this keeps some of us awake and helps others of us to go to sleep.

I wonder about why Japan has to get the big 9.0 earthquake and ask God about this. I admit immediately that I know little to nothing about the tectonic plates' movement across the face of the earth. I've been told since I was little that earthquakes are just a natural part of the geological structure of our planet's existence. Also, as a boy, I never could figure out why California had so many fault lines and was so open to earthquakes of all kinds. There are still many predictions that a 9.0 or greater event will occur somewhere in that place where most of my immediate family lives.

I'm not sure if you ever have nighttime conversations with God about natural disasters, personal losses, destructive choices and misuse of gifts and abilities. For instance, I wonder why people who such wonderful computer language skills put them to use to send viruses to attack mostly those who have very little skills, with no other apparent goal than to cause misery and loss, at least in the computer realm. Hackers who try to steal secrets or money or the like are easily understood. But those who simply want to make it hard on others. Why? Or like the mountain climber who is asked why they choose to do this as their time off, replies, "Because I can. Or, because the challenge is there." Take the movie, 127 hours. It is actually the revelation of how important community is, especially to a self-sufficient type of person. But I digress.

Other nighttime conversations are less conscious than the ultimate questions that can fill some of our minds. I've always been fascinated with dreams and dreaming. This is in part why I studied dreams in my Ph.D. It is difficult to determine when the conscious reflections stop and the unconscious dreaming begins. Sometimes one segues into another.

The dreams themselves can be extremely vivid. I know I was recently having to press a button with my left hand over and over in a dream, until Lynn stopped my hand from moving, as I am sure it bothered her sleep pattern. I was either playing a video game in the dream or racing or perhaps piloting a starship. I suppose it doesn't matter much now. But we are told that the brain sorts our memories and keeps us sane by what happens to us during REM sleep and the narrative we can experience is the byproduct of that sorting process. This is but one explanation for dreaming. We do know that if we don't do REM sleep and do not have the benefit of dreaming that the brain begins to hallucinate, daytime dreaming, if you will. All of us dream, even if we don't remember dreaming.

Many of us have nighttime conversations. The one John tells us about is between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus was a Supreme Court judge. He was well educated and he had a strong theological background. He, of all people, would understand what it meant politically to go and have a conversation with Jesus. He starts with a positive affirmation of Jesus' ministry. He says Jesus must be doing what he is doing through God's presence and power.

But Jesus immediately turns the tables on Nicodemus and starts talking in what must seem to the well educated man to be some kind of code. He basically tells Nicodemus that none of God's work makes any sense unless the person who is considering it is "born again" or "born from above." Nicodemus tries to make sense of this by taking the comment literally, but this goes nowhere. So Jesus again says that there are two types of birth, one physical and one spiritual. The first one leads to physical life. The second one leads to spiritual life. There is no spiritual understanding of what God is doing without this second one.

I understand the second birth to be the conscious choice to acknowledge one's need of God and rebellion against God, to say "yes" to Jesus as the only way out of my rebellion, and into God's way, will and wonders. Some people wonder why some preachers constantly come back to accepting Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour and Lord, why some preachers continually ask people to forsake their sin, and give their lives unconditionally over to the care and mercy of Jesus.

It is because without that relationship nothing else in Christianity makes sense. Otherwise it is just another religion that urges you to do the best you

can, and try to be good when you know can't be good all the time. Only Jesus can breathe the breath of the Holy Spirit of God into us, as a spiritual CPR. Only Jesus can restart our hearts, our breathing, our lives, clearing out the garbage in our systems that keeps us from functioning with clear pathways, open lungs, systems working. Just as there are many things that can go wrong in our complicated bodies, and we do not know why, so we need the doctor Jesus to take us in his care, heal us and set us on his path.

Jesus was hard on Nicodemus when he wasn't following everything Jesus was saying. Jesus had expected a well-educated teacher of Israel to figure it all out fairly quickly. But the beauty of this nighttime encounter was not the fact that Nicodemus could not keep up with what Jesus was trying to lay out quickly. For instance, the fact that Jesus was self-identifying as the fulfillment of the healing of the people of Israel, as the cure for the plague of sin, as the symbol of the serpent Moses lifted up in the desert so long ago, so Jesus death operates for life in us.

The beauty is that because Nicodemus risked coming to Jesus at night to find out what was really going on, meant that Jesus would tell him and tell him in a way that no one else had ever heard. Only John records this encounter, as John's gospel uniquely records many encounters with Jesus that the others did not record.

Jesus gets to speak through John in a unique way, as he let him. We too have the privilege of speaking to one another about how we have encountered God. Jesus sums it up with one word: "love." God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that we might believe, that is, trust Him with our lives. Jesus didn't come into the world to say how bad it was or condemn it to hell, although he had the right to do so. He came into the world to offer a new relationship with God, not based on us being good enough, or doing enough good works, but based on his sacrifice, based on his life, based on his teaching.

And we don't understand, I don't understand all of his teaching, his life, every word he spoke. But I do understand this one. It's about knowing for sure that if you died today, you would be in the Lord's arms, talking to him about all that had happened. It's knowing for sure that you are loved and that you love him with your heart, the deep inner parts of who you are, the mind, the intellectual processes you pursue daily, the soul, the essence of

who you are, and your strength, whatever drive, passion and desire you have in this life aimed in God's direction.

Lent is a time for self-reflection. It is a time to wonder anew at what is happening in our spiritual lives. It is a time to re-commit ourselves, to commit ourselves for the first time to Jesus, to say in our hearts about our own lives, the only life for which we are truly responsible or have some measure of control, to say about my life, "Thy kingdom. Thy will be done. Here as it is in heaven."

As we continue talking to Jesus at night, we will not receive all the answers that we may or may not think we deserve. But staying with Jesus, talking to him, knowing he is there enough to take us through the most difficult parts of our lives.

Let us pray.