

Recently, I learned of the series called “The Chosen.” It is a retelling of the life of Jesus and his disciples pulled from the gospels and the imaginations of the creators of the series. I was told of it by a fellow pastor whose judgement and skepticism I have come to respect. Most attempts to put the bible stories onto film do not connect with me. There are aspects of religious tradition that they contain that, frankly, are not good biblical and theological scholarship.

At the recommendation of my friend, though, I decided to give “The Chosen” a watch. So far, having gotten through the first season, I have been impressed. The settings are from the ancient Palestinian world that is held under the control of the Romans. The cast is made of a great diversity of people - it seems the only prerequisite was that they spoke English, no matter the dialect. There’s much more I could say about it, but if you haven’t seen it yet, I’ll leave it to you to discover and make your own judgments. You can find it everywhere. I’ve been watching it on Prime Video, but it is also available without a subscription on YouTube.

I bring it up today, because the Pharisee Nicodemus plays a significant role in the first season. He is there from the beginning, in Capernaum, serving as a visiting teacher from the temple in Jerusalem. He is in the town when Jesus comes on the scene. It takes some time for word of this young rabbi to reach Nicodemus’ ears. But, as you heard in the reading, what he has heard has interested him. He finds himself in the vicinity of Jesus a few times before finally asking one of Jesus’ disciples to set up a meeting with Jesus, in the night.

John, the gospel writer, is FULL of symbolism. So, nighttime was much more than a time of convenience for Jesus and Nicodemus to meet up. In his station in life, Nicodemus had a lot to lose by even listening to a “rogue” rabbi. But as you hear in his words to Jesus – “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.” – Nicodemus is starting to sense that there is MORE to Jesus than the other rabbis and prophets that have drawn crowds. In fact, there is something ineffable about Jesus that has caused Nicodemus to seek more.

The scene of their meeting in “The Chosen,” is wonderfully nuanced. Nicodemus comes in firing questions – and Jesus is more than happy to oblige with answers. In his effort to help Nicodemus realize how big of a life change it is to live into Jesus’ wisdom, Jesus speaks to the Pharisee about being born from above – also translated “being born from the spirit,” “being born anew,” and, yes, “being born again.” In that moment, the Pharisee is not processing metaphors. He is so incredulous at this saying that he makes a joke about “being too old to be birthed from his mother again.” Jesus is willing to laugh at the joke, but he wants Nicodemus to try hard to grasp what he’s saying, so he tries to point out the direction of the wind and share that no one knows where it comes from or where it goes – and make a correlation to the movement of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not convenient – it does not arrive on our schedule allowing us to transform into a new level of spiritual alertness when the timing is right for us. But if we want to grow closer into being the beloved children God calls us to be, we have to allow ourselves to be molded “into the likeness of Jesus Christ; a likeness of deep intimacy with God and genuine compassion for all of creation.” (From the definition of ‘spiritual formation’ from the PCUSA)

For someone like Nicodemus who has cultivated a life understanding the world in a particular way, what Jesus is asking sounds impossible. It is almost as plausible as being rebirthed from one's mother after growing into mature age.

But here's the rub: Jesus believes Nicodemus can do it. Jesus can see in Nicodemus the desire to grow more deeply intimate with God. The problem is the rules and the regulations of the religious institution have made life too rigid, and have left a LOT of people outside on the margins. That isn't Nicodemus' experience, because he has gotten quite comfortable on the inside. However, this Pharisee is beginning to become uncomfortable with his comfort, and is beginning to grow compassion for the afflicted. And therein lies a conflict of faith.

I'm going to have us watch a scene from "The Chosen." It comes after Jesus and Nicodemus have met. Jesus, well, being the Chosen One of God, can tell how close Nicodemus is to risking all of his earthly stature in order to choose the way of heaven. So Jesus has extended the "Follow Me" invitation to Nicodemus. The next morning, next to a well, Jesus will be meeting up with those he has called so far, to move on to their next destination. In the clip you will be introduced to, in order of appearance, Matthew, Andrew, James and John (saying goodbye to their parents), and Mary Magdalene. You will see Nicodemus sneaking out of his house with a bag of coins. Then, Simon (who later Jesus names Peter), saying goodbye to his wife and mother-in-law. At the well, Jesus is also joined by the other James and Thaddeus.

First visiting Jesus in the night, we will find Nicodemus hiding behind a wall, filled with emotion about not being brave enough to step out and follow Jesus with the others. Let's watch.

▶ The Chosen: Season One, Episodes 7 & 8 (1:07:34 - 1:10:46)

“Is there anyone else?” Jesus calls out. “You came so close,” he says aloud. It's heartbreaking! But, oh so real. There's something about Jesus – sometimes we're willing to seek and find more. Other times we hide ourselves in our fear hoping not to be seen.

If the story hadn't been available for over two thousand years, I'd say “spoiler alert.” But, through the beautiful work of the Fourth Evangelist (John), we see that this isn't the way the story of Nicodemus ends. He appears twice more in the narrative. He appears again in chapter 7, gathered with other Pharisees, who are arguing over exactly who Jesus is. One of his peers asks, “Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him?” The text continues,

50 Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before and who was one of them, asked, 51 “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” 52 (The other Pharisees) replied, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.”

Ah, those Pharisees were so sure of themselves ... so smug - “Nothing good can come from \_\_\_\_\_.” I imagine we can fill in our own biased thoughts there, huh? **Look, Martha! It would appear that implicit bias plagues all cultures. As it was in the beginning...and so forth...**

But we see Nicodemus is continuing to question – continuing to wonder if not only can something good come from Galilee, but the actual Chosen One of God? From the places we least expect...

Speaking of ... finally, in chapter 19, when Jesus is being brought down from the cross after his crucifixion and death ... who is there but none other than Nicodemus. It is the middle of the day, and he has shown up to prepare Jesus' body for burial. Something happened ... we don't know what it was ... but something happened to help this man push through his barriers – not give a darn about shame, or losing stature, or even admitting he had it all upside for most of his life – there he is embracing the broken and bloody body of the Chosen One of God – being one of the agents for new life to be born out of a tomb – dare we say, preparing for the spirit to come from above and offer brand new life?! From darkness to light.

Back to that night, when Nicodemus visited Jesus, he arrived at a crossroads.

Do I stay on the path I have cultivated for myself ... the one I know ... the one that is predictable, safe, and on which I receive accolades and honor? Or do I follow the way of the Messiah, and learn from God's wisdom, applying myself to helping usher *Adonai's* kin-dom here on earth?

I imagine those wee hours in the night, when Nicodemus would wake from a dream, with the idea of following Jesus on the forefront of his consciousness. Surely he considered what we heard in our text from Genesis:

When *Adonai* visited our ancestors Abram and Sarai in *Haran* (itself a 'junction of trading-routes') and told them that if they were to follow God wherever God led them, that not only would *they* be blessed by *Adonai*, they

*themselves would be a blessing* in the world. Abram and Sarai had **no idea** where God would take them, and yet somehow they **KNEW** that by following God, their life would be full. And they went!

Day after day, night after night, the call drew Nicodemus, but the timing just wasn't right. Then all of a sudden a movement happened – Jesus was picked up by authorities, Jesus was questioned, Nicodemus' sect of Pharisees were advocating for Jesus to be crucified by the Romans ... he had to do something ... he had to do something. But what? The tide was pulling too hard, too fast ... anything he were to say now would be like whispering in a gale. It was too late ... it was too late! He had wasted too much time clinging to what was safe and secure ... he had wasted too much time clinging to the values of the world and forsaking (FORSAKING!) the values of God's realm. **WHAT HAD HE DONE?!?** Or, rather, what had he not done? He had not made the choice to follow the way of God.

And so even when all seemed lost – that he had missed his chance of being redeemed – gaining life in the Spirit – he would ask God's forgiveness as he helped lay Jesus' body to rest.

My friends, Nicodemus is a stand-in for each of us. At some point during our lives we have heard that there was something special about Jesus. There is something about Jesus' teaching that has touched our lives. For you are here. You all are listening to the sound of my voice because something about the gospel has caused you to seek more. What is it? Can you define it? And if you can define it, **WHY** is it? Why has Jesus' message touched you? If Jesus' message connects with you because he said that those who have faith like a child are more blessed

above others, then why does that have meaning to you? What is it about children that speaks to you - they are inquisitive, pure, willing to explore; they unconditionally trust those who truly love them. Why does that matter to you? Because those who tried to care for you still fell short and hurt you and left you with emotional scars that make it so you cannot trust others without condition. But what difference does it make that God sees you through Jesus' eyes, and God loves you for who you are, and if God does that for you God certainly does that for others and maybe it is worth seeking those others out in order to find your people so that together you can advocate for those who are currently suffering under the weight of those who have neglected them....

...Then "Oh my God, you've found a way to follow Jesus that, while not easy, will make your heart sing."

Do you know what you are seeking?

Why?

Why?

Why?

*(using a different tone)*

Why? Because God loves you, and wants you to be a blessing in the world.