

An Awakening from Nighttime to Daytime Belief  
By Josette Keelor

Today's third reading offers a contrast between what Episcopal priest Michael K. Marsh (<https://interruptingthesilence.com>) calls Daytime Lives and Nighttime Lives. It's not about the time of day, he argues; it's a state of mind.

I think it's also about how we see ourselves versus how we *want* to be seen. Metaphorically, it's the difference between those things we want to shine a light on and those things we try to keep hidden.

In the light of day, we've built our lives to be viewed by others—our jobs, our hobbies, our relationships, our activities. It's how others see us, and it's also what we might find acceptable to show the world.

By the dark of night, we try to hide or push away those parts of ourselves that we don't understand or don't want to face because we're afraid of our innermost thoughts or we're trying to escape the failings of our daytime lives.

Daytime Life might be Facebook or Instagram, where we post things we want to the world to see, whether good or bad. There, we can craft our stories. There, we use filters on our photos to make them more palatable. There, we post condensed versions of our lives.

Nighttime Life, however, is what we ignore when we pick up our phones, and it's what is still there waiting for us when we put down our phones. It's what looks back at us from our mirrors. It's what we might journal about. It's very likely what we pray about.

And what are we praying for? Intervention? Understanding? Awakening?

In this New Testament reading, I think that's exactly what Jesus is offering. When Nicodemus comes to Him for clarity on all the miraculous works that he's heard about Jesus performing, it's because he's in the midst of an awakening that he doesn't understand but knows he needs to continue.

Jesus is a light in the darkness for people lost in the metaphorical wilderness, suffering in silence or afraid to be themselves in a world that would shun them for questioning the status quo.

In contemporary terms, we might think of woke culture. At its core, it's about having been awakened to the reality around us that we previously didn't notice—or didn't want to notice.

I've experienced situations like this in recent years. One big moment was in 2016 when my dad died a year and a half before he intended to retire. Only two days earlier, he'd been talking with my uncle at my nephew's baptism about how he planned to retire at age 70. But he never got there. Of course, he couldn't have known he would die so soon. But that's exactly my point. None of us knows how long we have, and yet many of us prolong our suffering in jobs or relationships or other pursuits that aren't serving us because we're either afraid of change or we think we can't afford to leave right now—when, in reality, maybe we can't afford *not* to leave.

If you knew you were going to die tomorrow or next week or a year from now or even 10 years from now, would you still make the choices you're making? Would you keep your current job or look for something more meaningful? Would you stay with your current friends group or look for people who are more supportive? Would you keep putting off your dreams in favor of saving money for an uncertain future?

Every time I start to think of that word "future," I think of my dad and how he was trying to work just a little bit longer so that when he retired at 70, he could draw more from Social Security. And I think of how he never got there.

It's a reminder to us all that, while planning for the future is a wise decision, it should never be at the expense of living your life now.

And with that thought, we return to Nicodemus, seeking out Jesus in the nighttime when he won't be noticed by others who aren't serving him so he can instead learn more about this new truth he's suddenly become awakened to.

"Rabbi," he says, "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Jesus seems to deflect these words when He tells Nicodemus that "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." And while He probably is trying to show Nicodemus another layer of God's plan than the Pharisee has so far been seeing through the miracles Jesus has performed, I think that Jesus is also validating the fact that Nicodemus is there.

Nicodemus has, indeed, had an awakening, or else he wouldn't be there, would he? He has heard about the miracles, and although it doesn't sound like he's witnessed them firsthand, he's at least seen the result of Jesus' work. Maybe he's seen people walking around who, only days earlier, couldn't walk. Maybe he heard testimony of people being cured of illness. Regardless, he didn't dismiss these stories like so many others, and he didn't resolve himself to fearing Jesus or the power that Jesus would wield against Nicodemus and the other Pharisees. Instead, he heard and saw and recognized that these signs conflicted with the life that Nicodemus had been living and everything that he had previously known—and he let himself be changed.

A willingness to change is only the first step, though, and Jesus isn't about to stop at mere praise of Nicodemus for coming to speak with him. Instead, Jesus challenges him to go deeper. "Okay," He says, "You're here now. You've seen the signs and responded. Now on to the next level. Now you must understand why all this matters."

By noticing and accepting these miracles, Nicodemus HAS been born from above. He is born again. He has been awakened.

Now he needs what Jesus says next to *continue* his awakening to the Kingdom of God: "[N]o one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit," Jesus says. "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."

Nicodemus clearly doesn't understand, and until researching this reading for my homily, I really didn't get it either. But in keeping with the idea of awakening, I think that Jesus is saying

Nicodemus needs to think beyond the earthly reality he's always known and be willing to accept the seeming impossibilities that God can facilitate in him.

“What is born of the flesh is flesh,” Jesus says, which could mean that the ideas of humans are bound by the restrictions of human failings. But when He says, “What is born of the Spirit is spirit,” He's inviting us to think bigger, to see past our human failings, to witness the power that God can wield, and to allow ourselves to be awakened to these spiritual ideas that we so fervently refuse to see because we're so afraid of change. We convince ourselves we have all the time in the world. We believe the unenlightened when they urge us not to go against the grain, because they're “only looking out for our best interests.” We say we believe in God, but then we don't give our will and our lives to His service.

“Do not be astonished,” Jesus continues. ““You *must* be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Believing in God means trusting Him even when we don't know where we're going or where He is leading us. Being born from above—or being awakened to God's power and influence in our lives—means we can have faith that everything will work out according to His will even when we can't see how and even when we want so badly to take the reigns and drive all the decisions ourselves.

Jesus then continues, saying the most well-known verse of the New Testament and what Rev. Emily Heitzman (<https://musingsfromabricolage.org/2017/03/13/the-gospel-in-a-nutshell-sermon-on-john-31-17/comment-page-1/>) points out is the verse that Martin Luther described as the “Gospel in a nutshell.”

“For God so loved the world in this way: that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but may have eternal life.”

*[T]his eternal life Jesus means is not necessarily what we often think of when we see this verse on bumper stickers or hear it quoted by street preachers, Heitzman says. The Greek word aoinios [A-o-in-ios] – which we translate into “eternal” or “everlasting” – is an adjective which means: “age-like” or having “the quality describing a particular age” or period of time.*

*According to Strong's Greek Concordance: this eternal life “operates simultaneously outside of time, inside of time, and beyond time. [It] does not focus on the future per se, but rather on the quality of the age it relates to. Thus believers live in “eternal life” right now, experiencing this quality of God's life now as a present possession.*

*To put it in other words, eternal life is an age of being in the presence of God. Eternal life is an age and a state of being in which we experience and understand the love and grace of God that is realized in and through God incarnate, God in the flesh.*

*[F]or the author of John, eternal life is not just about some kind of life after death that we can only reach in a different time and a different realm. God is not in a place that is distant and*

*separate from us. Rather, God is always with us in our current place and time. Thus, eternal life is a new life we are born into from above, when we are born anew. A life that we may experience in the future, but one that begins in the here and now, as we believe in, put our trust in, and follow Jesus Christ in his radical and inclusive way of love.*

*Eternal life is a new life we enter into as we are born of the waters and Spirit... a baptismal life that is full of grace. A transformational life that is experienced when we open our eyes, look to the cross, and bring to light our own [underhandedness]. A life that is experienced when we recognize and begin to let go of our fleshly and worldly desires to put ourselves first, to strive to be on top, and to dominate over others... And when we start to repent of our own participation in and benefits from today's oppressive systems.*

*This eternal life is experienced when we remember what God has and is doing for us. That God offers us salvation from the evil in the world and calls us to take part in freeing ourselves and all our neighbors from it. That God saves us from the sins [that have kept us in bondage to our own self-interests]...*

*This eternal life is one in which we can experience because of God's great love for us, not because of anything that we have done.*

In looking at our lives and noticing where they don't align with God's word or His will, we have the opportunity to ask ourselves what we want our lives to be—and why we've been so afraid to change before now.

When in your lives have you approached Jesus “in the dark” to find clarity through the chaos? And what will it take for you to approach Jesus, instead, by the light of day—in full view of everyone and everything that you claim is important enough to post about on Instagram and Facebook or prioritize over things that might be more fulfilling?

What's stopping us from dropping everything, as the apostles did, and following Jesus?