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Psalm 121; John 3:1-17

BETWEEN THE VERSES

Psalm 121 is a psalm for those undertaking a pilgrimage--a holy journey of faith--which could be you or me if we want to think of our lives as our own holy journey of faith. Here is how we typically read the first two verses of Psalm 121: "I lift my eyes to the hills--from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." But what if it was meant to be read like this: "I lift my eyes to the hills--from where will my help come? (long pause) From *where* will my help come? (pause). My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth." What if the psalm writer intended there to be a long pause between the question in verse 1, from where will my help come, and the affirmation in verse 2, my help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth? Before we run past the question--from where will my help come--to get to the answer--my help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth--what about lingering for a moment in the pause between the verses. Because, I think that if we are truthful, that is where a lot of us find ourselves: in the pause between the seeking for answers and for help, and an affirmation of trust in God.

The fact that the writer of this psalm even asks the question, from where will my help come--is important. There are some people of faith who don't even ask that question. Maybe they truly have a faith so deep that no matter what happens in life they can immediately affirm--my help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. But I think that such people are rare. Most of us, I think, find ourselves living much of life between the verses--between our seeking and questioning and our affirmation of faith.

That does not mean we are unfaithful people. Even as we live between the verses, we are still people of faith. We may come to church, offer our prayers. But we still wrestle with questions. We wonder in times of hardship. We seek to understand painful, hard, complex matters in our lives and our world. We strive to find sacred meaning in life. Belief is not always easy. And going through the motions and rituals of faith may not always move us to a quick affirmation that "my help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth." And so we find ourselves living between the verses.

I think that is where Nicodemus finds himself. Nicodemus, as we learn from John's gospel, is a Pharisee. He is a religious leader and a person of great social status. But even though he is a keeper of the faith, something is not working in Nicodemus' life. We don't know exactly what isn't working for him, but we might imagine based on the kinds of things we encounter in life that leave us searching for answers. Could it be that even though he was one of the wealthier members of society, even though he had material comforts and social status, that Nicodemus still found life empty of meaning? Did Nicodemus wonder to himself, "what's it all about?" Or could it be that even as a promoter of the faith, could it be that sometimes Nicodemus found the rituals and the words and the rules and the religious system itself unfulfilling? Did Nicodemus look about him at all the suffering and pain of his people, did he see the cruelty of their Roman oppressors and the corruption of some of their own leaders, and did he wonder about where God was in all that injustice? Had Nicodemus suffered a personal loss, maybe the death of a loved one, and the grief had left him filled with a profound ache within his soul and his heart? Or did one of his kids rebel against him, resist the love and the parental guidance he had tried to offer?

Something wasn't working for Nicodemus because he, a well-regarded religious leader who was supposed to have his life all together, comes looking for Jesus. He has been living between the verses, between the questions and the affirmation and so he comes seeking Jesus. Nicodemus has heard about this man Jesus, about the things Jesus has been teaching and about the things Jesus has been doing. And something lights up inside Nicodemus. Nicodemus discerns that Jesus must be a teacher from God and so he wants to connect with this man. He wants to know more. He wants to find that thing in life that is real and authentic.

Every Tuesday morning I gather at a cafe on the west side of Buffalo with a group of clergy from various Christian traditions to discuss the Bible passages for the upcoming Sunday. We go to the counter, order our coffee, tea, and breakfast choices, and then we head to a room upstairs to talk through the scripture passages. Many of the other members wear clerical collars so the group stands out as a bunch of pastors. This past Tuesday the young woman who works behind the counter asked one of my colleagues, "What do you guys talk about up there?" So he told her. And she lit up with interest. If she weren't working, she said, she would be so interested to listen to our conversation.

I wonder if you have ever had that kind of experience. Have you ever been drawn to something or someone because you could tell it was authentic and meaningful? I think that is how Nicodemus felt. He heard about Jesus and he knew Jesus represented something *real*. In the midst of all the suffering, all the pain, in the midst of corruption and oppression and empty rituals, and striving to get ahead and stay on top, and going through the motions of life, Nicodemus perceived that Jesus offered something sacred. Whatever was going on in Nicodemus' life, there was a gap between his knowledge *about* God and his experience of *knowing* God. And so he comes seeking.

But at the same time, he keeps his seeking a secret. He doesn't want others to know that he is searching for meaning, looking for God, because after all, he is a religious leader! So he comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness.

And he and Jesus have a conversation and it's clear from the questions Nicodemus asks that he doesn't fully understand what Jesus is saying. Jesus talks about being born again--which seems really weird and strange to Nicodemus. Nicodemus wonders how a person can enter the womb again. But Jesus goes on to talk about being reborn by the Spirit of God. The rebirth God desires for humanity is to be born in God's love. For love is the sum total of what God is about. Love and not condemnation is what God desires for us. To know God's love, to live in that love, is the path to lasting life.

We don't know from our passage today what Nicodemus thought about this conversation with Jesus. Did he leave Jesus more confused than when he came? Did anything Jesus told him make any sense? Did it help Nicodemus in his seeking and searching? The passage doesn't tell us what Nicodemus thought.

But what we do know is that Nicodemus surfaces again at the end of John's gospel--at the crucifixion. After Jesus dies, Nicodemus and a man named Joseph of Arimathea, take Jesus' body down from the cross. Nicodemus brings the spices and herbs for burial and the two of them wrap Jesus' body in a cloth and lay it in the tomb. This man who first crept to Jesus in the darkness of night because he was too afraid of people seeing him, now in the light of day when the stakes couldn't have been higher, helps care for Jesus' body. Somehow, in some way, that nighttime conversation prompted Nicodemus to follow after Jesus, and even to be there at the time of Jesus' death when so many had abandoned him.

It is hard to know if Nicodemus found what he was searching for. Maybe as he walked away from Jesus after that late night conversation, maybe even as he lowered Jesus' body from the cross, maybe he still found himself searching for the sacred to help him with his own journey through life. Maybe Jesus' words left him filled with a whole lot of new questions, like what it looked like to be born again in the Spirit, or how a person could live fully in the light of God's love. So maybe Nicodemus continued to find himself in that place between the verses, between searching for answers and affirming God's presence. But what *is* clear is that even if Nicodemus didn't have all the answers for a fully formed affirmation of faith, what is clear is that he chose to orient his life toward Jesus--toward the one whose presence spoke of God's love, whose death revealed God's love.

That is all any of us can do as we live between the verses in our own lives. As we search for the sacred to make sense of our lives and our world, we can orient ourselves toward the love of God revealed in Jesus. Fully formed affirmations of faith do not always come easily. Often we live with more questions than answers.

But like the writer of Psalm 121, *we* are on a pilgrimage. And pilgrimages involve a process. The season of Lent is not about our having all the right answers of faith. The season of Lent is about our willingness to orient our lives toward Jesus, toward the one who reveals God's love. Step by step, we strive to follow this one who shows us *that* we are loved and *how* to love. And to live such a life is the holiest of journeys.