

## **By Day or By Night?**

Rev. John Allen

One of my favorite books is a children's book called "The Dark." The book has two characters a young child named Lazlo, and The Dark.

The book begins laying out the problem in the simplest terms. An image of Lazlo, in his room, playing with a little truck on the floor, a flashlight within reach.

"Lazlo was afraid of the dark. The dark lived in the same house as Lazlo, a big place, with a creaky roof, and several sets of stairs."

Lazlo has a habit we learn of going to the top of the basement stairs each morning in the light of day, to say hi to the dark.

"Lazlo figured if he visited the dark in the dark's room during the day, then the dark wouldn't visit him in his room at night."

But one night, when the bulb of his nightlight burns out, the dark does visit him. And calls to him by name...

I love children's books that treat the experience of children seriously. That do not act like they are merely waiting around to become adults, or that the things that they imagine and the things that the fear are simply charming, or silly, or cute.

This book expresses something which I remember feeling quite profoundly, that the dark was a thing. Not just the absence of light, but the presence of something, something which often felt unnerving.

What is it about the night?

Have you ever had worries that have kept you up, that in the light of day suddenly seem to fade into a more realistic context?

Have you ever had questions that turn over and over in your mind at night, that you cannot seem to muster the same interest in during a lunch break?

Do you imagine possibilities that you cannot quite bring yourself to present at an afternoon meeting?

I think we are just generally more open at night. More open to what is going on within ourselves. More open to our sense of precariousness and vulnerability. And more open to the presence of God.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. And his motivation is often presented in an unflattering way. That he did not want his friends to know he was coming to talk to Jesus, that he did not want to risk his reputation by conversing with this radical rabbi.

And I am sure that was part of it. But I also think that we are just more open at night to the kind of conversations that end up turning our worlds on their heads. We are more apt to ask the kind of big questions of ourselves—and others—that threaten not to leave us the same.

I think that most of us have our daytime spirituality, and our nighttime spirituality.

Our daytime spirituality is self-conscious. We recall and recite familiar answers to hard questions. We laugh off what we cannot bear. We numb ourselves with busy-ness in the face of what we cannot fathom.

Then there is our night-time spirit. The late-night conversation with a trusted friend. The tortured deliberations with a spouse after the kids are asleep. The worry that keeps us up late into the night. The prayers we whisper to God beneath the covers.

This is the space where we are real, where we are raw, where we are vulnerable.

When we do not have the tasks of the day to distract us. When we do not have the light of the sun draw our attention here, and there, we are left, within ourselves, to really ask, and wonder, and pray.

This, more than anything else, I think, is why we are afraid of the dark.

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So in the story of Nicodemus, we see that Jesus is willing to meet at night. That Jesus is willing to receive Nicodemus' nighttime worries and wonderings.

We see that Jesus is willing to meet in the mystery of the dark evening, to explore a vulnerable part of Nicodemus's heart.

Nicodemus it seems had lived with a sense that somehow the life he was living was not enough, that what he had been taught was not quite right, or that there was something more...

During the day, it was just a nagging sense, easily ignored or forgotten among the thousand of other responsibilities and diversions. But by night... it kept coming up, again and again, unbidden, unwelcome even, until one night he brought his question to Jesus.

The content of their conversation is fascinating, but its for another sermon. What I want us to notice here is just this: that when Nicodemus came to Jesus that night, Jesus met him, heard the question he offered with such vulnerability, and offered him loving presence, and a dose of grace-filled truth.

It reminds me that those things that entangle our spirits by night are real, and worth attending to.

And although you and I cannot walk down the street to knock at Jesus' back door for a chat, we can bring those things that roil in our night-time hearts, to God in prayer.

Those questions that we try to hide from. Those fears we try to distract ourselves from. Our conscience asking us to do something hard that we fight to ignore. What would it feel like to simply bring God into the loop of your racing mind, and bring whatever your heart holds into conversation with Jesus, to see how it feels when held in the light of God's love, and how it looks when it is met with God's grace.

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That night when his bulb burns out, Lazlo gets to know the dark a lot better. The dark leads Lazlo through the house, all the way to the basement, the dark's room, at night, Lazlo is terrified.

And yet the dark points out to him, rightly, that the basement is where he will find the lightbulb he needs, and so Lazlo braves it, and returns to his room to fix the broken bulb.

The last page of the book is nearly identical to the first. Lazlo in his room, in the same spot, playing with the toy truck. Only now, the flashlight is gone.

It ends with these words: "the dark kept on living with Lazlo, but it never bothered him again."