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Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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begin again?

Genesis 12:1-4a
John 3:1-17
How do we

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, 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 answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, '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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Listen to this poem titled "Open the Way" by Timothy Murphy.

Open the Way for God? Take the road, Calvary Hill. It is no easy path. Give up your greed, your tendency to wrath, go to confession, and lay down your load.

Turn your attention from your sad sack self to those around you, suffering and in need. Let no day pass without a kindred deed, take down the King James Bible from your shelf, drink deeply, grow like Jeremiah's tree beside a stream; it flourishes in drought and casts its shade on all beset by doubt who follow the hard trail from misery,

Hatred of self and others, moral fright and suicidal darkness into light.

Timothy Murphy was born in 1951 in Hibbing, Minnesota but grew up in the Red River Valley of North Dakota. He studied poetry at Yale but returned to be a businessman in a seven-state hog farm. Murphy was raised Catholic but left the church for a long time. He returned to the church in 2002, a year after his plan to shoot himself was dramatically interrupted by a call from a friend who had become a priest. His four volumes of poetry were about friends, his dogs, hunting, and

Christianity. This poem seems autobiographical, perhaps describing how he discovered the way to God, how he transformed his,

Hatred of self and others, moral fright and suicidal darkness into light.

This poem for some reason reminded me of our biblical character, Nicodemus, who visits Jesus in the cover of darkness, seeking answers for his nightmarish ruminations. Biblical scholars love to fight over the character of Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a prominent man, a scholar, and a religious teacher. The question is always when he snuck out at night to find Jesus – was it an act of faith and courage or an act of cowardice and fear? For the sake of argument today, let's say that it was an act of desperation.

Maybe Nicodemus was not just a casual spiritual seeker with a few unresolved questions in his mind. Maybe Nicodemus could not sleep because he was a night rider. Night riders are those who wake from sleep in the middle of the night to ride around in their heads rethinking their worst moments of the previous day, and to think through all the worst-case scenarios for the day ahead, night riders worry, they fret, they doubt, they toss, they turn. For the night rider, sleep is not their friend. The darkness does not bring peace but torment. The poet describes the night rider as one who walks the, "*hard trail from misery, Hatred of self and others, moral fright and suicidal darkness.*" Maybe Nicodemus, the leader, the advisor, the scholar, found himself unable to answer his own hardest questions, unable to appease his darkest thoughts.

It does not say specifically that Nicodemus woke Jesus up but that is the most likely scenario. Jesus was asleep when this guy shows up and calls him, "Rabbi." Nicodemus was looking for the teacher and Jesus engaged him. They have some 'back and forths' about how to begin again, about how to live in God, about how to be open to things from above, and then Jesus ends this exchange with what is perhaps the most famous Bible passage from Jesus, John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." It continues, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Nicodemus was looking for answers and what he gets is far more, Jesus pulls back the curtain, to reveal to Nicodemus the mystery at the heart of creation. God loves. God loves the world. God so loved the world that God gives us the opportunity to be saved and thereby live in that love and walk in that light. Nicodemus, in the darkness, discovered the light of the world. Remember how John begins his gospel, just three chapters earlier? With these words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it."

Jesus was the light shining in Nicodemus' darkness. Jesus revealed for Nicodemus the light of the world, which was God's love. This love may not give us a quick or simple answer to our questions. It may not solve our financial problems or cure our cancer. It may not fix our marriage or make our parent's illness go away. But it will become our companion on the journey. It will be the light that makes it possible to walk the path. And it will become a safe place for our questions and our

dreams and our fears. Jesus revealed for Nicodemus the love of God and in doing so gave him a new beginning.

John Mulder is a Church Historian and the former President of Louisville Theological Seminary. In 2012, he published a book called *Finding God: A Treasury of Conversion Stories*. It is a collection of over 60 stories of new beginnings from the Apostle Paul to Bono. John's own story was included in the "Afterward." He writes, "One might say I was predestined to be a Presbyterian. I always thought of myself as a person who never knew himself as anything but a Christian. Then, I crashed. It was September 11, 2002, I was physically, emotionally, spiritually broken. My crash, I later learned, was the result of undiagnosed bipolar illness and a pattern of drinking that had progressed into full-blown alcoholism. But I was also morally broken."

John resigned the presidency and spent the following year struggling with what he called "the physical, spiritual, and moral wreckage of my life." He went to AA and drifted in and out of abstinence. "All the while, I prayed, 'Please Lord, forgive me.'" Eventually, friends and family convinced him to enter a residential treatment program. He continued to pray, "Please, Lord, forgive me."

This is how he tells the story, "Nothing happened. I had no sense of God's forgiveness. I had no sense of God's love. As another counselor said, I was 'spiritually bankrupt.' After two months in treatment and after praying continuously for God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of others, I simply gave up that prayer. Instead, I prayed, 'God, open me up. Please open me up.' I am not exactly sure why I prayed that prayer, except that I had reached the end of my rope and didn't know anything else to say. "On the morning of December 9, 2003, I was making breakfast in the little kitchenette of the apartment I shared with three other men. They were still sleeping. I was spreading peanut butter on an English muffin, when suddenly I was surrounded by white light. It was not blinding or frightening but warm and embracing. At first, there were no voices or sounds, but as the light subsided, I eventually heard, 'You are not alone.' Then the light faded. "The staff at the treatment center told me later that this event marked the beginning of my recovery.

Only after I prayed to be open to God did God again become part of my life. Was it a conversion? Maybe, maybe not. My life and ministry have been so abundantly blessed by God, and surely that means I had some relationship with God. But at some point, I walked into the swamp, and there I found God again. With the help of my wife and my family and wonderful friends, I began to walk the path of discipleship again. Perhaps the best way of describing my experience is that it was the most powerful moment in my continuing conversion. And it all began with a simple prayer: 'God, open me up.'"

Timothy Murphy's poem was a prayer, asking to be opened. Open the way to God is how it begins, and the poem ends with the path, darkness turned into light. The prayer for all night riders is that the transformative power of Jesus would shine light into our darkness and open us up. Open us up and let the light in.

Nicodemus was bold enough or desperate enough to go and find Jesus for himself and he was opened. Here's how we know. When Jesus' body was taken down from the cross, it was Nicodemus, along with Joseph of Arimathea who asked to bury Christ's body. Nicodemus brought

a hundred pounds of spices to anoint and prepare the body. A burial fit for his king from a man transformed by God's love. Nicodemus found the light and found the way.

Whenever the darkness threatens to overtake you; remember this story of rebirth. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not, will not, cannot overtake it. How do we begin again? By letting the light in.

Open us up, Lord.

Amen.