

The main character of the movie "Fight Club" travels extensively for his work. Edward Norton portrays him as thoughtful, but troubled, and unaware of the source or the depth of his troubles. Early in the film, he muses on the reality of contemporary travel, which can happen at such high speeds that one can cross several time zones in a single day, a phenomenon unprecedented in human history. Abram may have followed God's voice to leave his home for a land he had never seen, but at least he didn't have to deal with time zones, jet lag, or daylight saving time. But Norton's character takes the thought further. He asks, "If you wake up at a different time in a different place, could you wake up as a different person?"

Waking up has a special significance for the character, who suffers from insomnia. For most of us, waking up is a welcome opportunity to start anew and seize the day, or at least to have a good cup of coffee. For an insomniac, awakening may feel more like a frustrating defeat by an invisible, untouchable adversary. As the character says, "When you have insomnia, you're never really asleep... and you're never really awake."

St. John doesn't tell us why Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Those who emphasize the symbolism of John's Gospel know that night is a potent symbol of ignorance, misunderstanding, opposition to Jesus, and supernatural evil, but while Nicodemus does have trouble understanding Jesus in this encounter, he seems no more dense than people who encounter him by day, and certainly not evil or an enemy of Jesus. The most popular explanation seems to be that he was afraid to be seen with Jesus, or even seeking him out. That's certainly plausible, even though the text supports arguments both for and against that explanation. Nicodemus doesn't seem to express fear, but he could have been afraid of being associated with a controversial figure who challenged the religious elite, of which he was a member. He could have been ashamed, as a member of what was basically a religious supreme court, to be seen consulting with a rustic itinerant preacher with no credentials.

But on the following two occasions when John mentions Nicodemus, he offers his support of Jesus in very public ways. The second time he appears, he offers legal support by insisting to his colleagues that Jesus was entitled to a trial. The third and final time, he offers physical support, in broad daylight, helping to carry Jesus's body from the cross to the tomb, and anointing him with an astonishing quantity of myrrh, an amount that would have sufficed for 200 burials, worth perhaps \$150,000.

So perhaps fear of being seen is an inadequate explanation of the timing of Nicodemus's journey. He may have suffered from insomnia. He may have been kept awake by anxiety about leading services in the morning. (It happens.) Or he may have been working late. Jewish scholars were known to study scripture literally day and night. Perhaps he had hit upon a passage that hit a little too close to home with an implication that Jesus was truly the long-awaited Messiah.

Incidentally, no one ever seems to ask what Jesus was doing up at this hour. If

Nicodemus had to wake him, John doesn't mention it, and other passages suggest that someone outside a house would have made quite a commotion trying to wake a sleeping inhabitant. Insomnia seems unlikely, especially if you remember the story where Jesus was asleep in the boat during a raging storm. Jesus could have been studying scripture too, or praying, or waiting with foreknowledge of Nicodemus's arrival. Or John could be making a subtle reference to Jesus's divinity by portraying him as a metaphorical light in the literal darkness.

The dialogue is classic and beautiful, but also frustrating, because Nicodemus cannot free himself from literalism. He is unable or unwilling to key into Jesus's spiritual revelations, and his failure to understand makes his responses absurdly obtuse to our ears. Appropriately for the situation, Jesus speaks of spiritual rebirth. The Greek word that our translation renders as "born from above" can also be translated "born again," or my preference, "born anew." The last translation fits better with Nicodemus's response and the rest of the dialogue. Perhaps in this instance the darkness represents not evil but the hopeful darkness of anticipation, the darkness of Advent and the womb.

So maybe I was being too hard on Nicodemus. And Jesus asks a great deal of him. He asks nothing less than that he become a different person. That is the inevitable result of being born anew. If you went to anyone for counsel and they told you you needed to become a completely different person, how would you react? Probably not as well as Nicodemus. I don't even like it when people say I should smile more. Incidentally, I just got back from a family member's funeral.

Anyway, the story and what we do in church together are far more important than me. And I think the heart of this story is that Nicodemus didn't give up. He had every reason to turn away, or never to have come in the first place, but despite the difficulty of what Jesus said to him, Nicodemus stayed engaged with Jesus and went on to be a faithful follower of Jesus, though he kept a low profile. John records no further communication between him and Jesus, but Nicodemus's subsequent actions show that he didn't dismiss Jesus's monumental challenge to let God make him a new person. That's impressive, because we can't know what, or whom, God will have us be after we are born anew.

I suspect that I am not the only one who feels closer to the Biblical figures who struggled to understand and follow Jesus than the ones who make it look easy. Nicodemus, Thomas, the Woman at the Well, Peter, Mary Magdalene. These are my people. They wrestled with the inner questions and social difficulties of following Jesus. They questioned him and challenged him and knew deeply their need for his grace. They didn't say or do everything right but they were open to his teaching and his transformational presence. They show us that we do not need to have our spiritual lives in good order before we can interact with Jesus. On the contrary, the power of Jesus's love is most readily visible in the souls and lives of seekers, doubters, questioners, and sinners. They hung in there, and that was enough.

The difference between being a saint and an enemy of Jesus is not your track record. Jesus came to save all of us, for all of us are sinners who need saving. The difference is not your theological opinions, for even those who met Jesus in the flesh didn't understand who he was, and the fullness of his divinity includes much that no one on Earth could ever understand. He loves us all anyway. The difference is openness to his grace and love, which are available to all of us regardless of our knowledge or understanding. Whatever you think about Jesus, whatever your doubts or questions, be bold enough to engage with him. Ask him hard questions, share your whole life with him, not just your praise, thanksgiving, and joy, but also share your doubt with him, your anger, fear, and disappointment. Don't be surprised if he has hard or confusing answers.

But sharing your whole self with Jesus is worthwhile, because by engaging with him and only by engaging with him can you be so thoroughly transformed, forgiven, healed, empowered and renewed that you could say your whole self has been born anew. You might indeed come out of your encounter as a different person, with a new sense of purpose, a deeper relationship with God, and a deeper joy and satisfaction than you ever thought possible.

Experience shows that dramatic conversion experiences do happen, but rarely. Most of us will gradually experience the transformation that a relationship with Jesus brings, as a process of growth that defines a lifetime, growth that comes in seasons of doubt and confidence, loss and hope, focus on self and focus on other. God sanctifies all of them, blesses all the seasons of our lives, hangs in there with us. Jesus is there for us day and night, so come to him, engage with him, fully and just as you are, that you might be made new.