



Roanoke, Virginia

May 30, 2021

“Night of Unknowing”

John 3:1-21

Rev. Benjamin S. Brannan

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. **2** 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.” **3** Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” **4** 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?” **5** Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. **6** What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. **7** Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ **8** 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.” **9** Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” **10** Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

11 “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. **12** If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? **13** No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. **14** And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 “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.

17 “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. **18** Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those



who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

In 1995, James Fowler published his book *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. He draws on Piaget’s theory of psychological cognitive development. Fowler says the journey of faith begins as we encounter the world for the first time; it is “undifferentiated faith” at the beginning when our basic sense of trust and mistrust are perceived which translates into experiences of assurance and harmony with divine.

Stage One: *Intuitive/Projective Faith*. We begin to perceive the world through the development of imagination, and intuition is unrestrained by logic... anything seems possible... therefore one might say in this first stage the child’s mind is “religiously pregnant,” as we develop a sense of right and wrong and God’s action toward the universe. Then we would move from the magical world to begin meaning-making.

Stage Two: *Mythic/Literal Faith*. Here we begin to see the world through story—concrete and literal, as we deal with and evaluate the previous stage of imagination. The gift of this stage is narrative... retelling family stories of ritual and myth and take them as they are, as well as biblical narratives. Here we realize issues of justice and fairness and begin forming images of God. As we move through storytelling, we can now think about what we are thinking about.

Stage Three: *Synthetic/Conventional Faith*. In this third stage, a relationship-focused identity is now forming, as one pulls together values and valued images, searching for a sense of self in relation to others. And as identity begins to form, to know God intimately holds that identity is essential. We begin to start to form beliefs and conflict arises when those beliefs are challenged, but these challenges are often ignored because they cause too great a threat to one’s formed identity.

Stage Four: *Individuative/Reflective Faith*. Now that we made meaning of identity, stage four is all about understanding me and understanding you, that you have a formed identity, too, and we are concerned with boundaries. Some adults may not move past stage three, because stage four is stepping out of the known, into a new way of interacting with what has been known, as we seek authenticity of self and of others and of groups. The transition is marked by conflict, mostly through struggles with beliefs and personal responsibility for beliefs, and here beliefs become more complex and nuanced. And then stage five changes all of that.

If stage four is working to define identity and relationship boundaries and systems of beliefs, stage five makes all of that permeable and porous, recognizing a deeper self within the unconscious.



Stage Five: *Conjunctive Faith*. Here is a realization that I am driven by more than mere thought; there is a deep dimension of the self that I may not be fully aware of. Not only is this within, but it is external as well, as one looks into and investigates the social unconscious. Within this stage, there is a deepened readiness for God, for a new relationship with Divine, that includes mystery and unavailability and strangeness as well as a closeness and clarity. Stage five is filled with paradoxes and the ability to hold a multi-dimensional perspective of what truth is. In this stage, truth is beyond what we perceive, and there is an acceptance of mystery and unknowing.

Stage Six: *Universalizing Faith*. Stage six is rare (even for you, George) because this is where the kingdom of God is real and is now and is participatory, where the self is nowhere near the center of life. Here is where one has “died to self, in order to live.”

Where do you think you are? What stage would you put yourself?

Trust and mistrust; imagination and storytelling; identity and forming a sense of self; authenticity of relationship; unconscious awareness of self, world, and God; or are you one of the few in stage six living in a reality of the Divine?

What about Nicodemus? Where do you think he is?

We read that Nicodemus is a Pharisee, one who knows and is obedient to the laws of the Torah. He was a “separated one”—as the name Pharisee means—separate from all ordinary life to keep every detail of the law. Nicodemus was also a ruler of the Jews. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of all Jews. He certainly has the knowledge of religion and the piety of the law to make him appear to be far developed in faith. Nicodemus has birthed a personal religion and is past stage one; he would be able to think logically through the narratives of the Old Testament, so he has graduated from stage two. Stage three, he identifies as a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, so there is identity as it relates to groups and others. He subscribes to a religiosity that equates value with obedience and holds that as truth, understanding right vs. wrong. He is pretty rigid in his beliefs, not quite open to other experiences. So, I would say Nicodemus is in stage three. But then Jesus happens.

This encounter occurs early in Jesus’ ministry. Nicodemus might have witnessed, or at least heard about, Jesus overturning the tables and clearing out the Temple. And it is then I think Nicodemus’ faith is challenged. I believe Nicodemus is in the movement from stage three to stage four. He is aware of something more. So, he seeks Jesus out. He wants to engage in conversation. He has questions. He has questions that he needs answers to.

“Rabbi, we know you are a great teacher who has come from God, for we have seen the miracles.” Not quite a question, but he is pressing for either confirmation or rebuttal. Does Jesus agree with him? He is hit with something deeper. And here is where Nicodemus begins to move into stage four. The conversation moves from logic to abstract, from earthly to divine, from flesh



to Spirit. You see, Nicodemus is operating from the logical, the earthly, the flesh. But Jesus meets him where he is, engages in this conversation, and kind of messes with his brain. Jesus presses his understanding. Nicodemus is challenged. His logical faith is unraveling in this moment. He realizes there might be more to all of this. Or perhaps he's just experiencing the reality of his unknowing.

In the darkness of that night, Nicodemus begins to experience the unknowing reality of faith. Nicodemus is given no ending, no conclusion. There is no definitive answer given. Nicodemus simply speaks no more. His last words: "How can this be?"

One commentator writes, "Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a set of convictions about what is real, what is possible... Of course, initially, this strikes us as promising. However, it is precisely what Nicodemus knows that becomes a stumbling block—or a darkness to which he clings—and that knowledge obscures his ability to hear and receive the testimony of the one speaking to him."¹

Not knowing or uncertainty is a kind of darkness that many find unbearable. Most people seek out answers in an attempt to find certainty. And those who demand certitude out of life will insist on it even if the facts don't match up. Logic and truth have nothing to do with it. Seek certitude and you will find your answers, by surrounding yourself with your own conclusions and dismissing all others. You then are closed off to possibility.

There is another way. Jesus is here telling Nicodemus and us there is a perspective on life that changes the goal of faith from certainty to humility. Embracing unknowing, is embracing humility. Humility in not having to have everything figured out. Humility in unknowing.

I have been reading daily devotions by Richard Rohr through the *Center for Action and Contemplation*. In early February, he dedicated a full week to the idea of "unknowing." In one he wrote, "Basic religious faith is a vote for some *coherence, purpose, benevolence, and direction in the universe.*" Unfortunately, the notion of faith that developed in the West leaned more toward rationality than hopeful mystery.

Richard often writes about the monastic life. "In meditation," he says, "we move beyond the doctrines and dogmas to inner experience. It is an experience of something beyond us, something that stretches us to a new understanding of mystery. This experience is an exquisite humility. In this space, God gives us the spirit of questing, a desire for understanding. Understanding is not the same as knowledge. This unknowing is a new kind of understanding." Richard continues, "In some ways it is like learning to 'see in the dark.' We can't be certain of what's in front of us, but with some time and patience, our eyes adjust, and we can make the next right move."²

¹ Gail R. O'Day, "John" in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 9: Luke John*, ed. Leander E. Keck, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 549-50.

² Richard Rohr, "Unknowing: Knowing that we Don't Know" *Center for Action and Contemplation*. <https://cac.org/knowing-that-we-dont-know-2018-10-08/>



A former colleague tells this story of a young girl who was in an admission interview for an honors grade school. The interviewee asks questions, records the child's responses, and then a decision is made by the admissions committee. Questions came and went, with her parents nervous and anxious behind her listening to hear her responses, yet the young girl seemed to be at ease as she answered each question. Then, the interviewee asks, "What would you do if the lights went out all of a sudden?" Her parents looked at each other, hoping their daughter would answer with what they assumed was the correct answer—grab a flashlight, ask for help, or even go flip the switch. After a few moments, the child said, "I would reach out to grab someone's hand." Friends, this is the faith of unknowing. The ability to sit in the dark, reach out a hand, and be lead. This is the faith of unknowing we are called to, and the hand we are to reach for is Jesus Christ's, the hand of God.

Nicodemus begins in the dark, he meets Jesus at night. Maybe if he stayed a bit longer, if he lingered more in that moment of unknowing, his eyes would have adjusted, and he would have been able to see. Or he might have just sat in the dark and reached out his hand—maybe in the darkness of that night he was ready to be lead. The space of unknowing provides a space of humble possibility. And it is where relationship truly begins. When we realize we don't know the full story, the full story of faith, the full story of the other—in that moment of unknowing, wonder is experienced and the possibility of something new emerges—and we let go of our prejudices, our closed-mindedness, our truth as the only truth. We accept the possibility of change.

We do run into Nicodemus again. In chapter seven, the temple guards return to the Jewish leaders without Jesus arrested; the Pharisees want Jesus killed. Nicodemus jumps in the conversation and asks a question of his own, "Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing from him?" Nicodemus now speaks on his own behalf, determining what faith and religion is for himself, going against "his group." He has stepped out from the cover of darkness, still unsure, but willing to challenge and be challenged.

And we see him once more after Jesus' death. Joseph of Arimathea, a fellow member of the Sanhedrin and a secret disciple of Jesus, asks Pilate for Jesus' body. Nicodemus joins Joseph in preparing Jesus for burial. He brought oils and spices, helped to wrap Jesus in strips of linen, and laid him in the tomb. Now, one more step in his journey of faith, Nicodemus is out in the open, seen in the light of day, helping to care for Jesus, the enemy. In that moment, as he prepared Jesus for burial, he could have looked at Jesus and said, "I guess all of those things he talked about were just foolishness. I knew he was wrong." But no. We don't know what he said or if he said anything at all. He might not have said a word while preparing Jesus for burial. But I believe Nicodemus has lived into the reality of unknowing. He realized he didn't need all of the answers. And perhaps, the last words Nicodemus spoke to Jesus on that night of unknowing, could be uttered once more, living into the full mystery of faith, saying, "How can this be?"

Amen.

