

I. Advanced Organizer

A. **I remember the first time it gnawed at me.** A deep concern that seemed to cloud my otherwise clearly developing worldview. I was only a couple years into experiencing real spiritual connection for the first time in my life, and it seemed centered in the person of Jesus....

1. **I was a theatre student in college** and our educational model meant we were with the same cohort of about eighteen students and one acting teacher nearly every day for three years. We became intensely connected to one another. And I can still remember the feeling that formed in the pit of my stomach when one morning, **my acting teacher shared for us his story of deepest angst.** He described falling in love with the beauty of God at a young age raised in the Catholic church. And then being internally tortured as a young Catholic teenager who knew he was attracted to boys. Praying, feverishly for God to change him. Coming to the heartbreaking conclusion that God must not exist, or if God does, God doesn't love him.
2. **Hearing my teacher share his moment of deepest anguish broke my heart.** As a very-young-in-my-faith-but-known-to-be Christian in the room, I had no idea how to defend this theology, and I feared the implied questions of my professor and my peers about my choice to identify as a Jesus-follower. **This did not seem like the God I was getting to know.** I found myself wrestling in a deep way with what felt like a profound disconnect between my experience of Jesus-centered faith and how the churches and ministries that were nurturing me and helping me develop my faith seemed to approach this topic. The books I was given on the topic left a bad taste in my mouth, even as I tried to swallow them.
3. And as I felt the dissonance between what I was experiencing with the queer people I loved, and what my church and college ministry taught about homosexuality, **I couldn't shake the feeling that I was stumbling on something deeply problematic; something that might have the power to dismantle my young faith altogether.** It also felt like something taboo to consider aloud with others. Though it's true my classmates may have looked at me with suspicion. I had the same problem with my church friends: to name my discontentment with their view on gay relationships opened me up to suspicion from my faith community. I felt if I told them what I thought, I wouldn't be seen as a person of real faith.
4. All of this left me wondering: was this whole faith thing **just a house of blocks that could topple of the right brick was removed, like some cosmic game of Jenga?** If I couldn't settle this gay question, was the whole thing gonna fall apart? But what of the experiences of God that seemed so powerful and real? What would I do with those?

B. **Starting a new series I'm calling "Reconstructing Faith".**

1. In this series we're gonna **explore the phenomenon of deconstructing parts of our spiritual frameworks, as well as what it means to build something new after that happens.** Some of you may not fully resonate with what I'm talking about; perhaps you're new to faith altogether and so you don't feel like you have anything particularly problematic to examine or take a part. Some of you might feel like you've been doing the Jesus-centered faith thing a while and don't really perceive any issues with it.
2. But chances are, wherever you're at, at some point or another, whether it's regarding your faith or not, **something about how you approach life and view the world has had to go under examination. Something has put a cloudy spot over the worldview you've cultivated.** And if it hasn't happened yet, then I'd posit, you simply haven't lived long

enough. Or maybe you've gotten really good at ignoring where I think this journey of deconstruction often starts. **What I'm focusing on today, "The Questions in the Dark."**

3. **You know the kind of questions I mean.** The ones that keep you up at night. The ones you might be afraid to confess to your friends or your spouse or your kids. They might be brought on by a raw moment of vulnerability in someone close to you, like the one I shared. They might be prompted by something you've been reading. They might come with a medical diagnosis you weren't expecting. It's like the "oh shit" moment in your soul.
4. Throughout this series we're gonna be exploring some of the questions that people in our community, not just me, have found themselves wrestling with. We're gonna take time to listen to one another and give each other space to share those questions out loud, for those who are willing to do it.
5. But today, we're gonna start by considering a character that appears in the gospels, specifically the account of Jesus' life written by John. We're gonna look at a character who had his own questions in the dark, and consider a bit of the journey that asking those questions seemed to take him on.

II. Now a certain man, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council, 2 came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him." 3 Jesus replied, "I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter his mother's womb and be born a second time, can he?"

5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must all be born from above.' 8 The wind blows wherever it will, and you hear the sound it makes, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

9 Nicodemus replied, "How can these things be?"

A. So here we have **a character who is asking his own questions in the dark of night, Nicodemus.** And this is a man who has reason to keep those questions under wrap. There's a lot at stake for him. The text tells us that he's from the religious class of Pharisee.

1. **Now first I want to saw a word on Pharisees.** The Pharisees were a kind of religious and political party, one of the most influential in their day. These guys tend to get a bad wrap in church, but often that comes from Christians who read the Bible with little knowledge of Jewish life, let alone first century Jewish life. Yes, these are the folks that Jesus was often impatient with. Yes, they are some of the Jewish leaders who conspired to bring Jesus down, seeing him as a real threat to their understanding of the faith and their role in it. But to see them as exclusively villainous is to paint these folks as two dimensional characters instead of the complex people that they were. **This was the group of Jews in Jesus day who were understood by Jesus peers to be the most serious God-followers.** They took their faith seriously. They studied their torah fervently. They went above and beyond most in their observance of the law. And it wasn't cause they had religious OCD. They cared about observing the law carefully and scrupulously because in the faith they had inherited, observing the law faithfully was how you honored God.

2. **And this guy, Nicodemus, isn't *just* a Pharisee, but he's a leader; a member of the ruling council, known in their day as the Sanhedrin.** Now the Sanhedrin was a body of local governance that the Roman occupiers allowed the Jewish people to have to settle matters in their communities. Think of it like a city council or a congress.
 3. Now we also know from the talmud, a Jewish source, that Nicodemus was very wealthy. According to that source, he was one of the three most wealthy men in Jerusalem, which was the big city in Israel. He was like a Peter Thiel or Mark Zuckerberg or Larry Page of his day.
 4. **So this guy was like having one of the richest CEOs in the country, who also was in the class of religious scholars, and serving in the senate all rolled into one. Nicodemus was a man with significant religious, political, and financial power in Jerusalem.** However you look at it, this guy was an important person of his day.
- B. And yet for a guy who seemingly has everything, something is clearly troubling him. And at the center of his questions in the dark seem to be this person of Jesus. What is it about Jesus that causes him to question?
1. Now this is early in John's account of Jesus' life. But John does something unique in the way he tells the story of Jesus. Whereas most of the gospel writers put an incident in which Jesus cleanses the temple, driving the money changers out, towards the end of the story, **John puts it in the second chapter of his account, right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.** It comes right before this story with Nicodemus.
 - a) We're not gonna get into the theories behind why John told the story differently than the others. What matters for us, is the story that John seems to be telling. Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry goes to Jerusalem, and makes a scene, confronting the religious, commercial, and political establishments of his day from the beginning in a loud public way. And then he performs miracles in Jerusalem that began to further draw people's attention. And one of the people who's paying attention, Nicodemus, has his own dissonant moment, his own "oh shit" moment, as he sees this radical rebel confronting his power and privilege, but he also sees his extraordinary capacity to minister.
 2. **Now there are a couple of ways Nicodemus could have responded, right? He could have dismissed Jesus outright.** He could have simply refused to acknowledge the miraculous that everyone was witnessing because it didn't fit in his framework. He could have allowed his confirmation bias bubble to activate and only take in any information that confirmed his worldview and reject out of hand anything that challenged it.
 - a) Honestly this is a popular way to deal with questions in the dark to this day, isn't it? Rather than give them any space, we try to force our concerns through the mental framework we've adopted. We look for things that confirm our framework. We may try to ignore things that don't. Isn't this what cable news as well, as a lot of youtube channels are sadly often all about?
 - b) Certainly this approach seems to be how most of the elites of Jesus' day handled Jesus. But not Nicodemus. He does something different. In the middle of the night, **he puts on a cloak and heads into the streets looking for the radical upstart rabbi. He brings his questions straight to Jesus.**
- C. **Jesus meets Nicodemus, and speaks to the question that he is having a hard time articulating.** How is this random carpenter turned rabbi from the back country able to speak to the powerful people of God in the capital of Jerusalem with such authority? He must have the backing of God's own self. How is that possible?

1. **Jesus in his answer confronts all of Nicodemus' assumptions with a simple statement.** "Unless a person is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." All the inherited status, money, social standing, religious training in the world isn't the source of real authority. It doesn't open your eyes to see God at work in your midst. That comes from being "born from above".
 2. Now I know some of us have heard this passage preached being told that this means a very specific thing to be "born from above" or "born again". Sadly, I think there are strains of the church today that have used this statement of Jesus to argue for a new kind of religious elitism, perhaps the same thing that Jesus is trying to dismantle for Nicodemus. Let's leave that debate to the side for another day, and focus if we can afresh on just what Jesus is telling this powerful man in front of him. **He seems to be issuing an invitation to start again, to experience a new beginning, a beginning not based on the priorities of birth, family, or social class.** About something beyond - something from another kind of dimension. Jesus uses the language of from above.
 3. And this stirs more of Nicodemus' curiosity. I really appreciate his honesty here. Jesus has just said a super counter-cultural thing that makes no sense to Nicodemus's experience and the worldview he's inherited. But instead of getting defensive and frustrated by something that doesn't fit his worldview, or just smiling and nodding and pretending it all makes sense when it really doesn't, **Nicodemus asks his questions in the dark. "How can this be? Tell me what you mean. Help me understand."**
 4. **Jesus has an answer for him. He talks about two kinds of births.** Yes there's the one where your mom's water breaks and your born in to life as a baby. But that's not all that matters. There's another kind of life Jesus is inviting his followers to experience. The kind of new life he has in mind. It's birth into the Spirit. And what is this Spirit? Jesus is describing the **Spirit with the images of a force that can't be controlled, that can't even be seen or traced: its like wind that blows.** You can't control it, you can't manufacture, you can't always even trace it. Instead, you simply have to surrender to the wind.
 5. Nicodemus is still confused, leaving him to utter the last words he says in this encounter, "How can these thing be?"
 6. A lot of Christians call Nicodemus a coward for coming at night. Or they say he's being stubbornly pigheaded not to just kneel and ask to be baptized after Jesus speaks his first words. But I don't see Nicodemus that way at all. In him I see a human, wrestling with his own scary wonderings in the night. And rather than just sit in those wonderings, rather than stuff them and become bitter and cynical, he follows his curiosity. **He gives voice to his questions, he trusts Jesus with them.** Perhaps he's already beginning to realize that the world he has helped construct, a spiritual and social framework built around his understanding of God, is problematic. It's a world built with what Jesus identifies as "the flesh", based on human effort and logic and experience. But when he brings his questions forward, when he asks them in the dark, Jesus invites him to step into something different. A new kind of life. **Nicodemus is beginning to realize he's going to need to dismantle some of his framework for understanding God, and potentially build something else.** He's gonna need to deconstruct and reconstruct some things.
- D. **I've talked before about my convictions about starting a gay friendly church, but I don't think I've shared as much about where they started. It was through those early moments of dissonance, sparked by experiences of vulnerability with folks like my acting teacher,** or with friends of mine who were finding themselves by coming out of the

closet just while I was finding myself by coming to faith in Jesus, and the questions I was asking in the dark around how these things could possibly co-exist. If it was just something I was trying to work out in my head, the dissonance might have been too strong. It felt like it may have been a deal-breaker for this whole faith endeavor.

1. **But I wasn't just working it out in my head. In that season, I was praying sincerely, bringing my questions to Jesus.** "How should I think about this? I've found self-acceptance and the love of God in you, Jesus, and it has been profoundly powerful and healing to come into community and experience that love from other people, but I also know I can't bring my gay friends to church. What do I do?"
 - a) And one night, when I was praying along those lines during a musical worship time with some other college students, **I felt like I got an answer, really clearly.** I felt like Jesus was whispering to me in my spirit as I prayed: ***Leah, this is a really, really important question you're asking. I'm really glad you're asking it. But there's not a good answer for you right now. So I'm wondering if you can trust me, and put that one on the shelf for a while. Not forever, we'll get to it, I promise, but for now, can you put it on the shelf?***
 - b) And for that moment, that was enough. I felt Jesus' invitation into mystery. I felt his permission to question what others seemed to say wasn't up for debate, and I felt peace with the not knowing, with being able to love my gay friends, to understand in that season I couldn't bring them to church, and to believe that wasn't the final picture. It wasn't everything, but it was enough to embark on a new journey with Jesus, a journey that I'd now call the beginning of deconstructing and eventually reconstructing this part of my faith practice.

III. In the same way, **John 3 wasn't the end of Nicodemus' story.** It was just the beginning. Nicodemus appears two other times in the gospel of John, and each time we can see that he has moved along in his journey with Jesus.

A. **The second time Nicodemus appears, it's not at night, it's during the light of day.** We see Nicodemus not isolated from his other powerful peers, but in the midst of them. The set-up for this incident is that the Sanhedrin have sent some of their security staff out to try to apprehend Jesus; to arrest him and bring him to them. When the officers find Jesus, he is preaching, offering all who are thirsty to come and drink, for through him flow streams of living water. We'll pickup the story in verse 40.

B. **When they heard these words, some of the crowd began to say, "This really is the Prophet!" 41 Others said, "This is the Christ!" But still others said, "No, for the Christ doesn't come from Galilee, does he? 42 Don't the scriptures say that the Christ is a descendant of David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" 43 So there was a division in the crowd because of Jesus. 44 Some of them were wanting to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him.**

45 Then the officers returned to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why didn't you bring him back with you?" 46 The officers replied, "No one ever spoke like this man!" 47 Then the Pharisees answered, "You haven't been deceived too, have you? 48 None of the rulers or the Pharisees have believed in him, have they? 49 But this rabble who do not know the law are accursed!"

50 Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before and who was one of the rulers, said, 51 "Our law doesn't condemn a man unless it first hears from him and learns what

he is doing, does it?” 52 They replied, “You aren’t from Galilee too, are you? Investigate carefully and you will see that no prophet comes from Galilee!”

1. It’s a short appearance, but a significant moment for Nicodemus. His peers are building a case against Jesus. Their framework for understanding God and the Messiah they believe God will send is firmly entrenched. They are convinced no one from Galilee could be God’s deliverer, and so they have a convenient way of dismissing Jesus outright and falsely accusing him of blasphemy and heresy, without even questioning him.
2. But **Nicodemus sees the flaw in the logic**. He has met this man. He has brought his questions in the dark to him. And now **in the light of day he pushes back**. He questions his peers. “Our law doesn’t condemn a man unless it first hears from him and learns what he is doing, does it?” This question is a direct confrontation of the scapegoat mechanism we discussed a few weeks ago, that is already at play, as Nicodemus’ peers are trying to falsely accuse and silence Jesus. Nicodemus is pointing out how they are bending what should be their own rules: that no one should be assumed guilty before even standing trial.
3. **The establishment system responds strongly to Nicodemus’ probing**. They know this isn’t an innocent question, he’s just broken ranks with them, when they were trying to stand united against Jesus. So immediately, **those aligned with the system turn on Nicodemus for even asking to give the guy a fair trial. They seek to delegitimize him, and they do it in two ways we see here**. First, they seem to be claiming that Nicodemus is **emotionally compromised**. Jewish tradition actually notes that Nicodemus did have family estates in the Galilee region. **Here it seems that Nicodemus’ peers may be using that as a reason to discredit his critique, implying that he’s too personally invested to be objective. Or, perhaps, they attack his knowledge; implying he’s poorly educated, and thus not someone they need to take seriously; he simply doesn’t know what he’s talking about.** “Investigate carefully...”, they say.

C. **I spent several years living in that in-between place, feeling profound dissonance with the church’s teaching on homosexuality, but feeling like the question was unresolved for me.** And then, in my late twenties, around the time I was beginning to sense a real call to pastoring and beginning a community like Haven, **I had another profound moment with Jesus**. I had a picture of myself bringing all the queer people I had known and loved to an alter. Jesus was there, and as each person was brought forward, he embraced them, fully and lovingly with tears in his eyes. I watched sobbing as I felt Jesus say, “Leah, it’s time to take this one off the shelf.” For years folks had spoken over me that God had made me to be a pioneer or a trailblazer. In that moment, I also felt Jesus say, “Leah, this is really what that’s about. Are you willing to pioneer in this way? To help lead a community where *all people* can be brought fully to the alter and embraced?” Though I knew the structures I was a part of would likely have to be much more deconstructed, what could I say at that point, but yes to Jesus?

1. In the years since, since I’ve also moved from keeping my questions in the dark, to challenging the systems and structures I’ve at times been a part of, or walking alongside others who’ve done the same, **I’ve seen the same dynamic Nicodemus experienced at play. People can get threatened by another’s deconstruction**, especially someone they perceive as close to them. It’s threatening to their own worldview. *If you take a part your house of blocks, is mine gonna be taken down too?* And so under threat, I’ve seen otherwise beautiful, loving, God-centered people, turn and harshly draw lines in the sand. I’ve seen them question other’s theology, rejecting any teaching that doesn’t fit their agreed upon sources. I’ve seen them accuse my friends and I for being *too emotionally*

compromised - “You’re only changing your mind because you think you’re gay, or because your kid just came out”, implying that an emotionally informed experience is somehow delegitimizing, rather than a vital experience to pay attention to.

2. But for those who are able to trust the Spirit through the journey of deconstruction, **I believe that many of us find that the journey does not have to mean losing Jesus. It actually means finding him in beautiful places that we couldn’t have gone before.**

IV. **The last appearance of Nicodemus is towards the very end of John’s gospel.** It comes right after Jesus has been falsely accused, tortured, and unjustly executed by the system Nicodemus was once a part of. But in the story of the trial and execution of Jesus, we don’t see this person of power still standing with the accusers, with the system he has begun not only to question in the dark, but in the light. We find Nicodemus somewhere else altogether. The story picks up just after Jesus has died In John 19, verse 38.

A. After this, Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus (but secretly, because he feared the Jewish leaders), asked Pilate if he could remove the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission, so he went and took the body away. 39 Nicodemus, the man who had previously come to Jesus at night, accompanied Joseph, carrying a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about seventy-five pounds. 40 Then they took Jesus’ body and wrapped it, with the aromatic spices, in strips of linen cloth according to Jewish burial customs. 41 Now at the place where Jesus was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden was a new tomb where no one had yet been buried. 42 And so, because it was the Jewish day of preparation and the tomb was nearby, they placed Jesus’ body there.

1. This is where we find Nicodemus at the end of the story, together with another member of the Sanhedrin who seems to have been on his own journey of deconstruction: Joseph of Arimathea. These two seem to have found one another as allies - followers of Jesus amongst a group who has declared him their enemy. And in this moment when the other Sanhedrin are declaring victory, and Jesus’ closest friends have scattered in fear, Joseph and Nicodemus go to do the hard, but beautiful work of honoring him in death, proclaiming through their actions who they believe him to truly be.
2. **The text says that Nicodemus brought seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes.** Now that’s an easy detail to skim by, but even on a casual reading, if we think about it, it seems like a lot. In fact, it *is* a lot. In their day, the average body was embalmed with a bout three quarters of a pound of spices. But it was also customary to honor people of value with more. Nicodemus was going extravagantly beyond what was expected, bringing a hundred times the amount normally used on a person to tend to the body of Jesus.
3. Scholars say that in today’s market, the value of this perfume would be around \$150-200,000. It’s an extraordinary amount for anyone. This isn’t the way you bury, someone; certainly not a criminal. **This is the way you bury a king.** Here, with this small detail, we see what a journey Nicodemus has taken. Nicodemus has taken a big journey from skeptic coming to Jesus in the night, to one willing to push back on the systems of his day, to one who now gives generously, freely, and extravagantly of his resources to honor the one he’s followed on his journey of deconstruction and reconstruction. **He has come, with his friend Joseph, to worship the one who showed him how to be born from above.** John doesn’t tell us about Nicodemus’ reaction to Jesus’ resurrection, but I’m sure he felt profoundly moved, validated and encouraged to see the power of this new life from above confirmed.

B. Last weekend was a beautiful experience for many of us, as we celebrated in the streets our own new life, born from above, at Oakland Pride. I don’t know about you, but it was a total joy

to me to be in a place where we could fully celebrate and proclaim the good news of “Female leadership, queer inclusion, racial justice, and Jesus.” This is just one example of the good fruit of a journey of deconstruction and reconstruction that many of us in our community have been honored to take, and I look forward to more experiences of freedom and joy with Jesus as we take hard questions to him, and find him leading us into a journey with the Spirit that is unlike anything we could have predicted or controlled.

- V. So as we end: I want to invite you to take a few moments to consider: what are the questions you have found yourself wondering in the dark? What questions are you wondering now? What would it mean for you to bring them to Jesus? How could we be a community safe enough to hear the questions and honor the asking? What might we build alongside one another? What might we build together?

Questions for Reflection and Conversation:

1. What kind of dissonant moments have you had regarding faith, or something else, that have caused you to reexamine how you view things?
2. How have your peer groups responded in the past when you’ve asked your hard questions?
3. What do you think would make a community safe for people to be able to deconstruct and reconstruct ways of thinking and practicing faith?